Case study of the identification of gifted students in an independent school in Sydney's western suburbs: What is working, what needs improvement, and what could change look like

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ABSTRACT

This case study presents a report of the identification processes for gifted students at an independent school in western Sydney. This study aims to provide some insights into the efficacy of the current identification methods and the perceived support for the identification of gifted students across the school leadership. The findings are informed by the analysis of students' ability and achievement tests over several years and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the school's leadership team. This methodology underpins the data collection appropriate for this research. Key findings highlight the challenges of providing and maintaining a consistent, robust policy that allows for rigorous identification and the reliance on ad hoc recommendations and limited data points. It was also noted that although there was a paucity of ability testing, empirical data did inform student allocation to academic classes associated with high academic performance. It was also found that the attitudes among the school leadership were positive, and they acknowledged a need for change. The report recommends that the school expand its procedures for identifying gifted students and support this with a formalized, clear, and accessible policy. This would ensure a more systematic and reliable approach to recognizing and nurturing gifted students, ultimately enhancing their educational experience.

Keywords: *Ability, Assessment, Education, Gifted identification, Gifted programming, Secondary school.*

Highlights of this paper

- This case study presents a report of the identification processes for gifted students at an independent school in western Sydney.
- This research aims to provide insight into the efficacy of the current identification methods and the perceived support for the identification of gifted students across the school leadership.
- An expansion of the current procedure would ensure a more systematic and reliable approach to recognizing and nurturing gifted students, ultimately enhancing their educational experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been many debates around the definition of giftedness (Hodges, Tay, Maeda, & Gentry, 2018; Worrell & Erwin, 2011; Yassin, Ishak, Yunus, & Majid, 2012), commencing in the early 20th century when Spearman (1923) defined the general ability to show exceptional talent or potential as the 'g factor'. The Cattell–Horn–Carroll theory (Schneider & McGrew, 2012) built on this idea, separating the 'g factor' into general fluid (Gf) intelligence, that is innate ability, and crystalized intelligence (Gc), or demonstratable abilities. Renzulli (1990) described a 'three-ring conception' of giftedness, which described a gifted individual as one who has above average ability, task commitment, and creativity. Tannenbaum (1983) used five factors in his model: a special ability, non-intellective factors, environmental supports, general ability, and chance, which interacted to produce giftedness in a person. The Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) developed by Gagné (2009) is the primary framework used for this paper to define giftedness, as it is the position utilized in NSW public schools (NSW Department of Education, 2023) and many independent schools, including the current research site. The DMTG separates the constructs of giftedness and talent, where giftedness refers to the natural abilities of a person and defines gifted as a person with an innate potential that puts them in the top 10% of the population in at least one area. By contrast, talent is as a result of the development of ability, where a person is performing in the top 10% of their field, including academic, artistic, sporting, and leadership fields (Gagné, 2009). The DMTG describes several internal and external factors that are needed to develop natural abilities into talents. Identifying talent is relatively easy, as it is the outward representation of developed skills (Hodges et al., 2018), whereas identifying innate abilities poses more of a challenge and ambiguity (Pfeiffer, 2002; Worrell & Erwin, 2011). There are many concerns with the identification of gifted students, including hard boundaries with percentiles (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018) using different criteria (Pfeiffer, 2002; Worrell & Erwin, 2011), different presentations of giftedness, (sometimes) uninformed teacher beliefs around giftedness (Harradine, Coleman, & Winn, 2014; McBee, Peters, & Miller, 2016; Tirri, 2017), and the identification of special populations and underachievers (Ford, 2014; Hodges et al., 2018; Jackson & Jung, 2022; Jung, Jackson, Townend, & McGregor, 2022; Yoon & Gentry, 2009). Special populations in this paper are identified as students who are twice exceptional (have at least one disability concurrent with their giftedness that influences their learning and academic performance), students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, indigenous students, and other gifted underachievers (Jung et al., 2022; Peters, Carter, & Plucker, 2020; Townend, McGregor, Alonzo, & Nguyen, 2024).

This study investigates the current procedures and effectiveness of the process to identify gifted students in a school and explores the opinions of the school's leadership team in relation to gifted identification.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How effective are the current identification methods for gifted students at the school?
2. Is the school leadership supportive of optimizing the identification of gifted students?

There are multiple methods used to identify gifted students, and the best way to ensure a robust identification procedure is to use multiple methods to avoid missing students who may present their giftedness in a variety of ways (Pfeiffer, 2002).

Ability tests are designed as a measure of a person's innate cognitive abilities, intellect, or intelligence. Individual ability tests, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the Stanford–Binet Intelligence Scales, are generally considered to be the most widely accepted and validated measures of intelligence (Rimm et al., 2018). However, they are costly, time intensive, and need to be administered by a psychologist, hence making them impractical as a screening tool for a school population (Rimm et al., 2018). However, abbreviated intelligence tests, such as the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (Cao, Jung, & Lee, 2017), the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT) (Cao et al., 2017; Pearson, 2024), and the Reynolds Intellectual Assessment Scales (RIAS) (Cao et al., 2017; Psychological Assessments Australia, 2024) are short versions of full psychometric assessments. These tests are administered individually but in a much shorter period, approximately 20–30 minutes. Additionally, the KBIT and RIAS do not require a psychologist and can be administered by a trained teacher (Pearson, 2024; Psychological Assessments Australia, 2024). Group ability tests, such as the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) General Ability Test (AGAT), have less specificity than individual tests (Rimm et al., 2018) and tend to be less reliable in the higher score range (Rimm et al., 2018). They are also more commonly verbally based and therefore contribute to the underrepresentation of minority groups and special populations in gifted programs (Hodges et al., 2018; Pfeiffer, 2002). However, they are inexpensive, easy to administer, and are considered useful for screening (Worrell & Erwin, 2011). Non-verbal assessments, such as the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test and Raven's Progressive Matrices, seek to measure abstract reasoning and intelligence without a reliance on verbal skills (Worrell & Erwin, 2011), which is argued to give these instruments an advantage when assessing students from special populations, such as those from a non-English speaking background (Ford, 2014; Hodges et al., 2018; Yoon & Gentry, 2009).

Another identification tool is the use of student nominations by a teacher, parent, or peer. These nominations involve a checklist or rating scale, where judgements are made about a range of student characteristics and achievements (Cao et al., 2017). Nominations can be a useful tool in screening students for further testing but should not be a requirement for entry into gifted programs (Worrell & Erwin, 2011). They can serve as one avenue for students who may have been missed by standardized testing procedures (Ford, 2014; Hodges et al., 2018; Yoon & Gentry, 2009). This includes students from special populations that can be underrepresented through ability testing (Renzulli & Gaesser, 2015). Nominations provide another avenue for potential identification among these groups (McBee et al., 2016) and can be used for a variety of types of giftedness beyond intellectual giftedness (Renzulli, Siegle, Reis, Gavin, & Reed, 2009). However, teachers need to be provided with sufficient training to make their nominations useful as part of the identification process (Harradine et al., 2014; McBee et al., 2016; Tirri, 2017).

2. METHOD

The data for this study came from the analysis of ability and achievement testing in secondary students at the school, alongside semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the school leadership team. The ability and achievement tests provided insights into student ability and performance in school, while the semi-structured interviews provided insights into the leadership support for identification in the school and the scope of any policies and procedures already in place. The ability and achievement data included achievement data from standardized tests widely used in Australian schools (Ronksley-Pavia, 2023). The ability data was collected using school records of the ACER AGAT that was administered to all Year 7 students (those who were in Year 7 in 2021 to 2024 and now are currently in Years 7 to 10). Overall scores and percentile ranks were used for each measure; the AGAT scores were not broken up into the different domains. The achievement data used standardized achievement tests, namely the ACER Progressive Achievement Test (PAT) in Mathematics and the ACER PAT Reading Tests. This data was used

to inform the eligibility for placement into the Year 7 academic class, which is aimed at high academic performance and is inclusive of all curriculum subjects regardless of individual student strengths. The students' AGAT scores were not used to inform placement into this class. The aim of the study was to review the success of the class placements in that took place in Year 7 by reviewing later AGAT scores to determine whether the achievement scores that were used to place students in high academic classes had been successful in identifying and correctly placing the gifted students in the cohort. A longitudinal component was not completed, as this was an initial snapshot study and because the data for subsequent years was incomplete. This data was used to examine the research question related to the current efficacy of data in identifying gifted students at the school.

2.1. Participants

The participant data was drawn from two sources, one was the testing data for students in the gifted range in Years 7–10 and the other was interviews with the school leadership, all from an independent school in a suburban city location in New South Wales, Australia. The school's Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) value places it in the 84th percentile for socio-educational advantage, with 26% of the student population comprising students with a language background other than English and 2% comprising indigenous students.

The students who were included as potentially gifted fell into two groups, those whose ability and achievement testing were at or above the 90th percentile, and those who just missed out but measured between the 80th and 89th percentiles. This is based on Gagné (2009), who identified the top 10% as gifted, but also examines students just outside this range to avoid missing gifted students due to the limited nature of the identification method used.

The interviews were conducted with the school principal, director of studies, and the head of gifted and talented in the secondary school. While these individuals have extensive experience in school leadership, they have varying levels of experience in gifted education. While the sample size is small, these individuals were chosen for their ability to inform and impact the procedures and policies around gifted identification at the school.

2.2. Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews included a series of eight open and closed questions that allowed interviewees to expand on their answers (see Table 1). The participants were invited to be interviewed via email, in which the project purpose, topic, and aims were outlined. The interviews were then conducted in person at the school.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview questions.

1.	How would you define giftedness?
2.	Is it a priority at the college that gifted students are identified?
3.	Who should have responsibility for the identification of gifted students?
4.	What policies and procedures does the college have in place to identify gifted students, and do you think they are being implemented effectively?
5.	What are the strengths of the current identification process at the college?
6.	What changes to the policy or implementation do you think would be helpful?
7.	Is it important that we differentiate between gifted students and high achievers?
8.	How is the college addressing the identification of gifted students in special populations, such as those who are underachieving, twice exceptional, indigenous, and those with English as an additional language/dialect?

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data was collected from Year 7–10 students from 2021–2024. The analysis was confined to students at or above the 80th percentile as measured on the AGAT ability test. This is in line with Gagné (2009) while also acknowledging

that gifted identification should cast a wide net (Cao et al., 2017; Worrell & Erwin, 2011), have multiple methods of identification available to students (Pfeiffer, 2002; Worrell & Erwin, 2011), and be tracked over time (Pfeiffer, 2002). As this was the only measure available regarding identifying innate ability, and it had only been conducted once, the top 20% was used as a benchmark to avoid missing potentially gifted Year 7 students in the data analysis who may not have performed to their best on the day of the test. Students were separated into two categories based on the AGAT ability tests, those at or above the 90th percentile and those between the 80th and 89th percentiles. The number of gifted students as a percentage of the whole year group was calculated, as was the number of students who were allocated to the gifted class. This allows for insight into research question 1, 'How effective are the current identification methods for gifted students at the school?', as the academic class aims to provide appropriate educational opportunities for gifted and academically high-achieving students. An analysis of these students' maths and reading PAT scores was also conducted, with the mean and range being calculated for each group to identify trends within the population. The student sample size was between 84 and 127 students completing the test, and five to 20 students being identified at or above the 80th percentile in each of the four year groups (Years 7–10).

Table 2. Examples of thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews.

Question	Theme	Sub-theme	Example quote
Question 1. How effective is the identification of gifted students at the school?	Current practices of identification	Staff	"We do have someone who is supposed to be looking after it (gifted and talented)."
		Policies and procedures.	"We do have Year 7 sit the AGAT test, which gives some indication." "We do have information that comes through from primary on kids who have already been identified."
	Negative aspects of current practices	Staff	"It is not currently being done well. Someone has been appointed to gifted and talented but, for the most part, that has been admin for out of school activities." "I'm not sure if classroom teachers are equipped to identify gifted students."
Question 2. Is the school leadership supportive of optimizing the identification of gifted students?	Changes currently being reviewed	Policy	"The assessment policy is currently being updated. Enrolment procedures are being updated, and parents are asked to supply information upon enrolment."
		Assessment	"We are changing testing for placement into Year 7, so testing will have more of a focus on interpreting data and critical thinking."
	Ideas for further changes	Policy	"We need to have a clear identification process and steps to identify students across the board, from primary to secondary, a whole college approach that is tweaked but fundamentals would be the same. Standardized testing, psychometric tests, classroom teachers, checklists. Different teachers will see things differently. A range of people need to be involved."
		Assessment	"We follow up on the AGAT, so we are picking up a bit more information." "We need to use other ways to identify gifted students, not just the AGAT. I don't know of any other tests, but there must be some."
		Staff	"Teachers need to know more about how to identify giftedness, because many of them don't and are surprised when they see kids they didn't know were gifted."
	Problems with future changes	Assessment	"Psychometric testing. We have no psychologist currently able to do it, but we are currently looking to increasing resources in that area. It's a very blurred line if we provide them. Ideally, potentially gifted students would get external assessments."
		Staff	"It's a struggle at the moment just trying to staff the place (school)."

The responses from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis due to the open-ended nature of the questions and responses. This allowed for rich insights to be gained and to find similarities and differences in the participants' responses (Ford, 2014). It was noted that a thematic analysis can lose some of the context of the answers and present some bias in choosing the categories and how the data is recorded (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). However, it allows for the identification of similarities between the answers, which produced the data necessary to answer the research questions. The interview responses were coded into two major themes (see Table 2) — current procedures and policies, and future changes to identification at the school. The current procedures and policies theme was subsequently split into positive and negative responses, and patterns of frequency and the intensity of the responses were analyzed. Sub-themes then looked at different facets of these areas, including staff, policies, procedures, and other strengths or weaknesses. This theme was designed to look for patterns regarding research question 1, "How effective are the current identification methods for gifted students at the school?" The future changes theme focused on changes already being reviewed, ideas for further change, and problems with change that may be encountered. This section aims to identify patterns for research question 2 regarding support from the school leadership for changes to the identification of gifted students.

Research Question 1: How effective are the current identification methods for gifted students at the school?

This question was addressed using the testing results, the class placements at the school, and the interview responses of members of the school leadership team. Gifted class placement was examined in relation to students' AGAT scores, followed by a review of the achievement tests, and the maths and reading PATs, which were completed in Year 7, the entry point to high school. By comparing placement scores to the AGAT scores, which are not part of the class allocation decision, we can see if the testing is effective at selecting students for appropriate educational programs. Note that while the gifted class may not be a suitable educational intervention for all gifted students, it is the main educational scaffold that is currently provided by the school for this cohort of students, and this study focused solely on the long-term outcomes based on the identification of the gifted class.

It was found that 100% of the students who tested at or above the 90th percentile for ability in the AGAT were placed into the gifted class in Year 7 based on their achievement score in the PATs. An average of 79% of students scoring between the 80th and 89th percentiles in the years 2021–2024 were placed in this class (see Figure 1). One to three students in this bracket missed out on top class placement each year due to not having high enough scores on the PATs. Considering that we have chosen to define giftedness as the top 10% of students based on their ability scores, this process seems to be serving the gifted students well by placing them into more rigorous, faster paced classroom environments.

However, some potentially gifted students in the 80th–89th percentile bracket may be missing out due to relying only on PAT scores for class placement.

Apart from the students in or above the 90th percentile in 2021, all other student categories presented math scores higher than their reading scores in the PATs. This could be indicative of the challenges for gifted students from language backgrounds other than English, especially as 25% of the school population falls into this category as AGAT testing and PAT testing is all in English. This warrants further investigation into the need for identification methods that serve this population.

This question also looked at using the responses from the interviews with members of the school leadership team. Many responses were negative in response to the questions that asked about current practices, and the participants often struggled to offer a positive response.

Year 7 students identified as ≥ 80th percentile with placement in the top academic class.
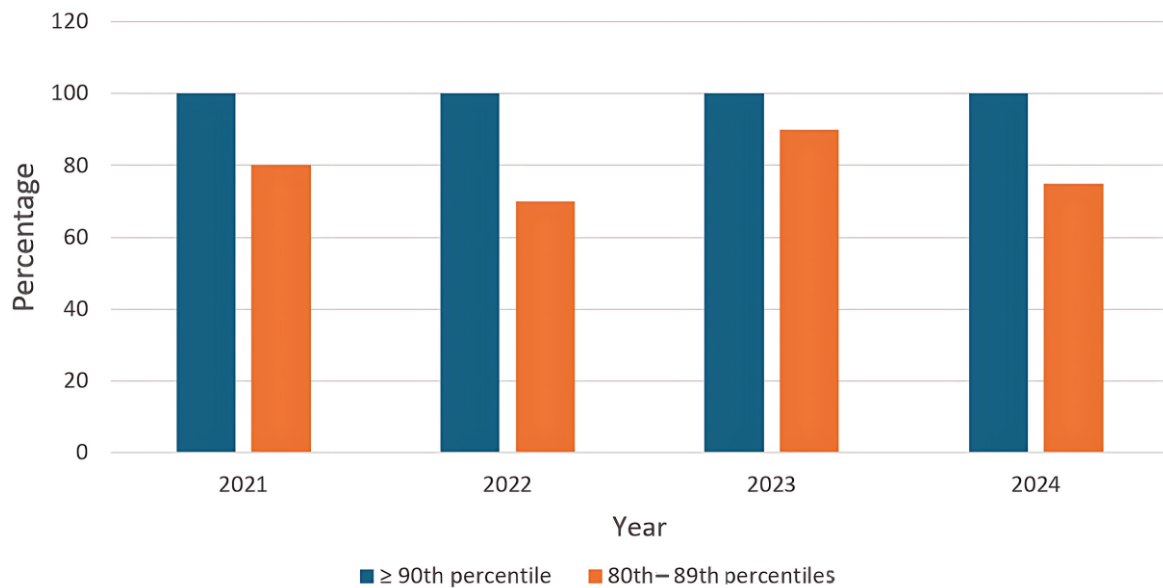

Figure 1. Percentage of students allocated to the top academic class as a percentage of all those identified above the 80th percentile on the AGAT test.

Positive responses focused on the fact that the school had something in place, including a staff member who is responsible for administering testing, and the AGAT is done in Year 7 as a starting point for identification. Also, the breadth of extra-curricular opportunities allows for identification in domains other than academic areas, and the collaboration between primary and secondary allows information on gifted students to follow them through their school career.

Negative aspects included the lack of allocation for the gifted and talented coordinator and how this results in a focus on administration tasks rather than identification, educational interventions, or support for classroom teachers. There was also a focus on the ad hoc and limited nature of identification at the school with a lack of rigorous policy and procedures. None of the interviewees were aware of any formal policies regarding the identification of gifted students. It was noted that while families and classroom teachers would ideally play a part in the identification process, it can be difficult for both of these groups to have adequate knowledge to make accurate recommendations. The interviews highlighted many possible problems with the current uses of standardized testing to identify gifted students at the school. Key responses highlighted the need for follow-up testing, repeating the AGAT in subsequent years, and the need to expand the testing options available for identification. Comments were also made regarding better storage and use of the available data to assist classroom teachers in their planning and differentiation.

Overall, the findings indicate that while some procedures are in place to identify gifted students, they are mostly haphazard and limited in scope and usefulness. No formal policy is currently in place for identification at the school.

Research Question 2: Is the school leadership supportive of optimizing the identification of gifted students?

This question was also explored using the responses from the interviews with members of the school leadership, which are listed in brief in Table 2. There was a clear theme among all interviewees expressing a need for change to the identification of gifted students at the school. The participants all stated that changes to testing procedures were an important part of this, whether it be changes to entry testing in Year 7, changes to the frequency of the AGAT, introducing new screening tests, or examining the way psychometric testing could be carried out with students. Other

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ideas included updating policies, such as the assessment and enrolment policies, and the development of a policy for the identification of gifted students.

Key difficulties in attaining this goal are the need for professional development for teachers and the need for a psychologist to carry out psychometric testing. Also, the participants cited low workload allocation for the gifted and talented coordinator and associated challenges with staffing resources. Overall, it seems that the leadership team is supportive of better identification at the school; however, with limited resources, it is not a high priority in comparison to other operational needs.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The identification of gifted students is a complex process that is going to depend heavily on the purpose for identification (Worrell & Erwin, 2011). Short-term improvements would be to make AGAT testing scores available to all staff, and gifted students should be easily identified to teachers via the school's learning management software. It is also recommended that the frequency of AGAT testing be increased to annually from Year 7 to provide multiple opportunities for identification (Pfeiffer, 2002) and to track students' results over time.

Future improvements could include a two-step identification process loosely based on the model provided by Renzulli (1990). The first phase would involve nominating a talent pool of potentially gifted students via ability testing scores, teacher and parent nominations, and academic grades. The school currently uses AGAT testing in Year 7, and a score in the top 10th percentile would trigger further investigations. Teachers should be engaging in professional development programs to inform them about the nomination process and the characteristics of gifted learners (Jackson & Jung, 2022; Worrell & Erwin, 2011).

The second phase would involve more in-depth testing of potentially gifted students, comprising an external psychometric assessment or an abbreviated, individual IQ test that can be administered by specialized teachers. Families would be given the option to seek a full external assessment or have an abbreviated assessment done through the school. The advantages of an extended psychometric assessment are the high reliability and validity of these test results and, as mentioned by the school principal, they then have access to the full report should they leave the school or need it in the future. The disadvantages are the high cost and the long waiting periods associated with this testing.

An abbreviated IQ test may include the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test or the Reynolds Intellectual Assessment Scales. The advantages are that these are quick tests, take around half an hour to administer, and can be carried out by an individual with a master's degree in special education (Psychological Assessments Australia, 2024), meaning that they could be administered as needed by qualified teaching staff. They also reduce the financial burden and negate the extended waiting period for a student to access the gifted program.

The study limitations include the scope, as it is limited to one research site. This makes the findings and recommendations specific to this school, and care should be taken when applying them in a broader context. Also, the number of participants was small, and while this was necessary given that the research scope was confined to the leadership team at one site, it is recommended that future single-site studies include a broader scope of interviews with heads of departments, welfare leaders, and classroom teachers. Furthermore, the school only had four years of historical AGAT data for Year 7 students; a larger sample size of year cohorts would have been beneficial for identifying patterns and trends.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the school faces some significant gaps in its identification policy and has several challenges to overcome to create a robust and effective system to identify gifted students. The key findings are that

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while the current testing regime is effective at placing students who have been identified as gifted on the AGAT ability testing into the appropriate classes, there is serious concern that this method of identification is missing gifted students due to its limitations. The school has no policy regarding the identification of gifted students and, as a result, procedures are inconsistent and narrow in their scope. The leadership team is generally supportive of best practice and would like to see improvements in this area. However, resources are not being allocated to this area, demonstrating a lack of priority in the identification of gifted students. To improve, the school should allocate resources to developing a clear and effective policy for the identification of gifted students and ensure a consistent and equitable implementation.

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