

AN INTERVIEW WITH CAROL S. LIDZ: ASSESSMENT AND GIFTED

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Carol S. Lidz worked in a variety of settings as a school psychologist for forty years. She is a graduate of University of Michigan (B.A., Psychology), University of Tennessee, (M.A., School Psychology), and Rutgers University-Graduate School of Applied Professional Psychology, Psy.D.). She has held faculty positions in school psychology at Temple University, where she directed the Early Childhood Specialization for School Psychologists program, and the Graduate School of Education and Psychology of Touro College, where she designed and directed the school psychology program. Just prior to her retirement, she joined Freidman Associates, where she provided school neuropsychological assessments of children with learning disorders. She is the author of a number of books, chapters, and articles on dynamic assessment and assessment of preschool children. Her most recent books include *Early Childhood Assessment*, published by Wiley in 2003, and *Dynamic Assessment in Practice: Implications for Clinical and Educational Settings*, co-authored with H. Carl Haywood, published by Cambridge University Press in 2007.

1. Carol, first of all, can you tell us what first got you involved in assessment?

Involvement in assessment kind of comes with the turf of being a school psychologist. However, it did not take long for me to feel dissatisfied with the available approaches to assessment, so I self-launched on a journey to find (and ultimately develop) alternative approaches.

2. What led to your specific interest in assessment of gifted students?

This was a bit of serendipity. First, I had the usual school psychologist's exposure to gifted children as the person who did their IQ administration. The outcome at that time was primarily eligibility determination for the existing gifted programs of the school districts where I was employed. Some of this testing was done during the summer months, and I would get hired specifically for this purpose. Later, as a psychologist with a Pennsylvania Intermediate Unit (a regional service), I was asked to become the director of gifted programming. This provided the opportunity to think about not only the identification of students for the programs, but the nature of giftedness and appropriateness of curriculum to meet their need as well.

As I became increasingly involved in the domain of dynamic assessment, some colleagues became aware that I was engaged in these alternative practices, and I was asked to develop an approach to identify children within a district's school with the most diverse population of students. They recognized that what

they were doing was not effective; that is, they were identifying less than 1 per cent of these students as eligible for inclusion in their gifted program, whereas, other schools in their district were determined to have 5 per cent of their populations as eligible.

3. Even when guidelines support the use of multiple sources of data, how important is it that an IQ of no less than 130 be included? Or should this criterion be modified?

I think that the idea of using multiple criteria needs to be taken seriously. In the case of my research study, the district claimed that they were using multiple criteria, but, when this was more closely scrutinized, eligibility really relied on the IQ score. It is also necessary to be clear about the nature of the program for which the students are to be considered. If the program is designed for the academically talented student, then the criteria for entry should clearly target this domain. Just as a program for the artistically talented needs to include samples of relevant art, there needs to be evidence of academic talent. Certainly those who are in fact academically successful should be included. IQ should be irrelevant for them, as IQ mainly predicts academic performance. If you already have a student academically succeeding at or above the third percentile, why bother with IQ at all? Then, among those with lower academic functioning, there are those for whom IQ may be helpful in picking up their academic potential.

I never support throwing out babies with bathwater. Among those who are neither academically successful nor of very high IQ, the multiple sources become very important. This is where the variety of sources of data described in our study becomes most relevant. Candidates can appropriately be nominated via questionnaires and scales completed by teachers, peers, and parents, and this is where the dynamic modification of standardized procedures plays an important role. If you are not already successful, then response to attempts at instruction is quite appropriate.

For students found to be eligible by alternative (to IQ or current academic performance) sources to be successful in a program for academically gifted students, it is necessary to realize that mere placement will not somehow magically generate academic success, since it hasn't up to that point. If a student is to be identified by alternative means, then the appropriate supports need to be put in place to assure that the predictions are indeed correct. After all, something obstructed their performance in the first place, so why repeat the problem that prevented them from being identified?

4. In addition to the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, are there other nonverbal cognitive assessments that you would recommend? (e.g. Leiter-3, etc.)

One of the most important findings of this study was the fact that the nonverbal alternatives were in fact NOT the best predictors. Therefore, I have none to recommend!

It has become almost automatic to propose the use of nonverbal tests for immigrant and minority children. Please believe our data. This is not a viable alternative. The superiority of the nonverbal test we used was only effective in its 'dynamic' format. However, do not misinterpret this as suggesting that children who are not fluent English speakers be given a test that requires them to speak English.

5. What alternative unconventional applications hold greater promise with the identification of gifted culturally and linguistically diverse learners?

I'm sure my response to this would be totally predictable. I think the study documents that dynamic assessment is an effective alternative.

6. Are there any particular exemplary questionnaires and/or rubrics that allow for the inclusion of information from families regarding their concepts of giftedness?

I think we offered a rather good one in our study. What we found from this was that not all parents thought their children were geniuses. In fact, some parents had not identified children we identified as gifted. In our questionnaire, we did not ask the parents if they thought their child was gifted. We parsed the defining characteristics of giftedness, and framed an item for each of these, asking the parents to check to what extent this characterized their child. We then set a criterion score that would count as parent nomination (or not).

7. In what ways should educators be observing for giftedness among students from minority backgrounds who have been significantly impacted by poverty and racism?

I would pay special attention to originality of thinking and problem solving. This should include everyday practical kinds of issues. It would also be relevant to be aware of children who appear to be leaders within their peer groups, as well as children with special talents. For these children, I think the information from the Sociometric approach that we used would be particularly revealing. Although we did not do this, it might be worthwhile to seek information from community sources such as religious leaders who may know the families.

8. What are the critical components of dynamic assessment for recognizing gifted culturally and linguistically diverse learners?

The most central component is the interactive nature of the assessment. There is interaction and provision of mediation that makes the experience feel more like an instructional conversation than a 'test', and the student has the opportunity to be exposed to the strategies relevant to problem solution of the task. This contributes to leveling of the playing field for learners who lack the

background knowledge and experience base for the tasks. They also become more familiar with the expectations of the assessor and the test designers.

9. In general, what age or grade should students be screened for gifted? Are there some age/grade levels that are to be discouraged?

Well, again it depends what kind of giftedness we are talking about. It also depends upon the degree of need of the student for special programming. The reason for having a gifted program in the first place is (should be?) that the child's needs are not adequately addressed in the regular education setting. This leads me to say that the option for identification should be available from the start of the child's involvement in the school system. Once a child is identified, what is done about it is another matter. The question remains to determine whether the current situation meets the child's needs.

I think this decision should be quite individualized.

Therefore I would say that: no age limit should be placed, there should be an array or menu of options that respond to the needs of the identified student, and the outcome should be customized for the individual, and re-evaluated periodically to re-determine appropriateness of fit. Should I follow this comment with: yeah; sure; good luck, etc.?

10. Are there any states/school districts successfully using dynamic assessment as outlined in your publication *An Alternative Approach to the Identification of Gifted Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners*?

Not to my knowledge. In fact, the district where the study was done, despite its successful response to the issue posed by them, has not to my knowledge incorporated the results into their practices. The cooperating school principal asked me, as I was leaving the building following completion of the study: "Now what?" All I could say was that it was not up to me. I could collect the information and give them the report and my recommendations, but I had absolutely no power in the situation. Such is the life of the researcher, and such has been my experience and frustration with dynamic assessment. Implementation of change and generation of policies and practices based on evidence is an ongoing issue.

11. What are the apparent problems/issues with quick screeners for full gifted evaluations?

The problem with screening is always the same: it is screening, not assessment. Neither placement nor programming should be based on screening. By definition, screening is meant to select a sample for further assessment. It is superficial and not meant to be definitive or final. It is screening. There are too many times when we are more concerned with saving time than with accuracy or effectiveness. I guess you could say this issue is another stone in my shoe (there are so many.....).

12. Who should be screening and/or assessing potentially gifted students?

I think it is important that the individual in charge of designing and implementing both the screening and assessment be properly trained and knowledgeable about not only the tools used, but the theoretical background, development, and interpretation of these tools. For screening, training of technicians may suffice, but they need to be carefully prepared and supervised. It should always be possible to overturn the results of the screening.

The final assessor should of course be properly credentialed and functioning at a high level of competence. It would be no surprise that I thought that school psychologists were the most appropriately trained professionals for the job. However, in the case of some specialized areas of talent such as music and art, collaboration with experts in these fields would be essential.

13. What sparked your initial interest in the identification of gifted children?

I have always been intrigued and interested in talent, whether academic or otherwise. It is so challenging to discover and be in a position to encourage children who may have been previously unidentified as being special in this way. Working with gifted children provides a unique opportunity to have input into individuals who may make important contributions as they mature. These children need appreciation and encouragement, just as any others. They may need even more nurturing in order to express and realize their potential. Many students from so-called disadvantaged backgrounds may in fact experience bullying and discouragement of their talents, especially if they are academic, and it is even more of a critical issue to identify and nurture them and offer guidance to their families.

14. Have you had any personal experiences that have informed your ideas and practices regarding identification and programming for gifted children?

When I was in fifth grade, all of a sudden I found myself moved into a sixth grade classroom. This had never been discussed with me, and I had no preparation for this. There I was, in sixth grade. Not only that, but it was done after the term began, so it was right in the middle of things. I felt as if I had been thrown into the ocean without life support. Because I was shy and compliant, I just sat there in a panic, thinking I was just supposed to know everything and somehow make it through. Of course, I didn't know everything, especially in math.

Thankfully, my parents could provide some tutoring for me (for the student who had just skipped a grade), but I never did learn much about Asia until I became a retired senior auditor. I assume that the school staff assumed that merely placing me at a more challenging level was sufficient intervention for someone who obtained a high score on an IQ test. They first of all had done nothing to determine if there was a need for such intervention, and they certainly provided no support to help me deal with the transition. I could have used a 'buddy' to help integrate me into the new class, and I could have used some teaching to provide

quick review of the content that I had missed. I still recall the prolonged feeling of anxiety and ongoing stress as I scrambled to get through that term.

15. What have we neglected to ask?

One point that I want to be sure to make regarding this study is that we worked on the assumption that giftedness existed in equal proportions within any population, and that our job was to find a way to reveal it. We therefore decided not to do anything different in response to race or other ethnic grouping of the students. All children would be treated the same throughout the screening and assessment process. We also did not select out the children from minority or immigrant backgrounds for assessment. We studied the entire population of the school. Our expectations were totally supported. The children we identified as gifted based on our procedures were indeed distributed in equal proportion to their representation in the population of the school.

Another interesting point is that, as mentioned above, we were concerned about placing children in a program for the academically gifted who would not otherwise (based on IQ) qualify. In other words, we did not want to just throw them in without support. Therefore, they were provided with mentors while in the program, mostly from among the students in the program. Informal follow-up determined that most of the students placed by our alternative approach did succeed. There may have been one or two exceptions. I think we clearly showed that IQ should not have the last word.

One final word about time consumption, as I often hear it said (incorrectly, I might add), that dynamic assessment can't be done because it requires so much time. Our study was indeed labor intensive and did require a great deal of time. However, it was also true that the time consumption only needed to be done once. Of course, we were spending much of that time to determine the best predictors. So that aspect needs no repetition by others unless they wish to replicate the study. Also, in practice, the screening and assessment of the entire population needs to be done only once. Following that, only students who transfer into the higher grades, or those entering the lowest grade need to be considered. Therefore, time consumption should not be a relevant obstruction.

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