



What Do We Mean By Above Average Ability

In The Assessment of Human Behaviors?

Joseph S. Renzulli
The University of Connecticut

*It is better to have imprecise answers to the right questions
than precise answers to the wrong questions.*

Donald Campbell

I have been asked on numerous occasions the meaning of the term “Above Average Ability” in The Three Ring Conception of Giftedness depicted above. The term is intended to convey a cluster of traits in all areas of human performance where one excels over their peer group. In some cases, this is easy to measure numerically. For example, when it comes to intelligence or academic performance, instruments such as cognitive ability and achievement tests allow us to give a precise number or percentile to these traits. Anyone who scores in the top 20 to 25 percent above the mean on standardized tests when compared with age-level peers is certainly considered to be well above average in traditional “schoolhouse learning” ability. The same is true if measuring things like height, weight, or running and swimming speed.

Other above average ability traits, however, must be judged by qualified and even credentialed observers (E.g., doctors, dog show judges, athletic referees, art show judges). And in many cases, feelings, attitudes, and values contribute to the judgements that are made about human products, actions, and behaviors.

As the above quotation so elegantly points out, it is *the questions* one is raising that determine how precise an answer we are seeking. If we are asking questions about a cut-off score for entrance to a gifted education program, then precision is obviously a consideration. But if you are asking other questions about various indicators of other types of students’

potentials, then we need to look at different types of information. This information is obviously not as precise as cut-off scores, but even adherents of IQ scores such as Lewis Terman (author of the Stanford Binet intelligence test) indicated that other factors are important. The results of a 40-year follow-up study of his “gifted children” indicated that personality and executive function factors are extremely important determinators of accomplishment.

The four traits on which the most and least successful groups differed most widely were persistence in the accomplishment of ends, integration toward goals, self-confidence, and freedom from inferiority feelings. In the total picture the greatest contrast between the two groups was in all-round emotional and social adjustment, and in drive to achieve (Terman, 1959, pg. 148).

It is for this reason that I have added other criteria for gifted program identification that is based on teacher observations and rating scales (Renzulli & Hartman, R. K. (1971), student self-ratings based on co-cognitive factors (Renzulli, 2021), and, of course, the creativity and task commitment components in the above figure, which make up the other two dimensions of the model. Traits associated with creativity include novelty, curiosity, originality, ingenuity, flow, and a willingness to challenge convention and tradition. Task commitment consists of a *focused* form of motivation. When an individual or group becomes interested in an idea or topic it is important that they develop the energy, and the investigative skills and willingness to take some form of action. Thus, above average ability in a topic area combined with creativity and task comment interact with each other to produce some kind of product, performance, or change-oriented action. A creative idea to solving a particular problem will frequently kindle the process of task commitment as applied to a problem-solving endeavor. Task commitment also influences the use many of the executive functions that are necessary for problem solving activities.

But even the interaction between and among the three components of the model does not make a person or not gifted. Rather, it points out that the interaction of these components produces what we like to call gifted behaviors (Renzulli & Reis, 2021). Young people think, feel, and carry out their work in much the same way as practicing professionals, even if at a more junior level than adult scientists, writers, film makers, etc. There is no doubt that persons pursuing topics at advanced levels must be above average in the knowledge base about which they are interested in pursuing. But they must also be able to develop above average skills in all three dimensions of the Three Ring Model. Studies of highly accomplished adults and young people who have been supported by the opportunities, resources, and encouragement of creative teachers have consistently reported on the use of these abilities (Renzulli & Reis, 2014).

References

Renzulli, J. S., & Hartman, R. K. (1971). Scale for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (SRBCSS). *Exceptional Children*, 38, 211–214.

Renzulli, J. S. (2021). Assessment for learning: The missing element for identifying high potential in low income and minority groups. *Gifted Education International*, 37 (1), (pp. 1 -10).

Renzulli, J. S. and Reis, S. M. (2014) *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A How-To Guide for Educational Excellence*. 3rd ed. Waco: Prufrock Press.

Renzulli, J. S. & Reis, S. M. (2021). The three- ring conception of giftedness: a change in direction from being gifted to the development of gifted behaviors. In R. S. Sternberg & D Ambrose (Eds.) *Conceptions of Giftedness* (3rd edition). New York, Palgrave MacMillan, Pp. 335 – 355.

Terman, L. M., & Oden, M. H. (1959). *Genetic studies of genius. Vol. 5. The gifted group at mid-life*. Stanford University Press.