

## **Providing Gifted Education Services for Diverse Students: Policy-Related Issues**

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Why can't gifted education be equal? Politicians and policy makers alike have tried to answer this question for some time. As political interest surrounds the educational achievement gap in America, proposed legislation and policies such as Title I, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and now Race to the Top aim to close this gap and bring equality to America's education system. Consequently, in efforts to aid students in the most need, many of these policies fail to consider gifted students, especially those of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds.

NCLB offers little attention to academic interests not recognized under the legislation. For example, the policy overlooks the best and brightest in our nation, perpetuating the desire to help students reach only a standard level of proficiency. Consequently, gifted students, viewed as beyond proficient, reach a glass ceiling with little room to develop abilities, interests and talents. Overall, the impact of NCLB legislation has contributed considerably to dismantling interest in gifted students by neglecting their classroom needs (Gallagher, 2004; Gentry, 2006; VanTassel-Baska, 2009). However, to maintain our position in an ever-evolving global market, the talents and gifts of students must continue to be developed in America.

Notably, the inattention toward talent development often affects CLD students who experience difficulty gaining entry to gifted programs. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) (2002), while minority students make up approximately 36% of the U.S. elementary school population, they comprise 19.7% of students in gifted programs. On the other hand, 72% of white students are represented in gifted and talented programs but comprise 59% of the student population (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).

Historically, the underrepresentation of CLD students in gifted education has been a controversial issue. Although much has been done on the federal level to equalize program entry for diverse students including the creation of more equitable definitions of giftedness, CLD students are still severely underrepresented in state gifted education programs across the nation. In this paper, using examples of policy, theory and research, we highlight the impact of current educational policy and practice on gifted education programming, systematically analyze the diverse factors related to the problem of CLD gifted underrepresentation and offer recommendations for reversing these factors.

### **Inconsistencies in Gifted Education Program Administration**

The problem of decentralized decision-making in gifted education programming is exhibited by the lack of a coherent national strategy or federal mandate in gifted education, which exacerbates the underrepresentation of minority students (Wiskow, Fowler, & Christenson, 2011). Unlike special education programming (i.e. IDEA), only the state and local levels take on decision-making related to gifted education. This context can cause fractured approaches to the provision of gifted program services between and within states.

More seriously, many states provide little direction concerning the gifted identification process. The insufficiency of clear and specific directions limits the implementation of consistent practices by local education agencies (LEAs). For instance, 14 states have no mandate regarding gifted services programming, and only five states provide mandates regarding funding for gifted services. Also, although 41 states have the definition of giftedness in statute or regulations, only 32 of these states require LEAs to follow the definition. Moreover, 35 states leave the specifics regarding

the requirement of particular identification processes to LEAs. Consequently, CLD students remain particularly vulnerable to higher probabilities of exclusion from gifted programs (NAGC, 2010-2011).

### **State Identification Practices in Gifted Education**

Within state identification practices, testing is also seen as a major issue in Gifted Education. Historically, IQ testing has served as the principal way to identify gifted students and has remained a controversial aspect of the identification process for CLD students. Gottfredson (2004) maintains gifted education programs are in an especially difficult position as they typically serve students who fall at the right tail of the IQ bell curve, an area where racial imbalance happens to be most extreme. Gottfredson also adds "If an IQ of 130 was set as the minimum threshold for giftedness, as many programs have done, about 2-3% of the general population would be found to exceed the threshold, but Blacks and Hispanics would rarely be identified as gifted" (p. 144). Much research maintains poor IQ test performance of some CLD students as one of the most important factors regarding unbalanced representation in gifted programs (Ford & Granham, 2003; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).

Although some revisions in identification testing have been made on the federal level to identify diverse students for gifted education services, the selection of test measures are largely decided on the local level. Cultural bias also continues to remain an issue as CLD students are frequently tested for gifted program entry using forms appropriate only for mainstream students. Groth-Marnat (1997) described how the Wechsler IQ Scale and other mental tests with various subscales are affected by socio-cultural factors. For instance, *the information subtest* measures factors such as old learning, schooling or alertness to daily lives. Also, in the *comprehension subscale*, test items contain questions concerning judgment in social situations or the comprehension of one's social settings to include knowledge of moral codes

or social regulations (Groth-Marnat, 1997; Gregory, 2004).

In addition, Davis and Rimm (2004) maintain that linguistically different children have difficulty taking verbal comprehension tests because the vocabulary reflects standard English. As a result, CLD children show large discrepancies between Wechsler verbal test scores and nonverbal performance (Scruggs & Cohn, 1983). In addition, Ford, Grantham and Whiting (2008) maintain that CLD students, unlike mainstream students, suffer from additional testing burdens that contribute to the low performance of CLD students in testing: (a) the actual test (e.g., test bias due to different language); (b) the test environment (e.g. administration of tests by administrators with different culture,); or (c) characteristics with (or within) the student (e.g., he/she is cognitively inferior or "culturally deprived").

As long as political pressures related to state-mandated testing and gifted identification practices exist in America, the underrepresentation of CLD students in gifted education will persist. "Were standardized tests of achievement in core subjects used to identify gifted students, the same pattern of racial imbalance would emerge as for IQ tests" (Gottfredson, 2004, p. 144). As CLD students are targeted for remediation under NCLB, high-achieving members of this group are often unnoticed for participation in gifted programs that could nurture their potential. Therefore, it is necessary to gain agreement on a common set of identification policies in gifted education for all students. Because this will take much time and effort from many stakeholders, teacher unions, school boards, administrators, local advisory boards and federal, state and local policy makers must work together to make this a reality.

### **Inequitable Educational Practices and Resource Allocation**

#### **Limited Teacher Preparation in Multicultural Education**

Much less attention is directed toward high-achieving CLD gifted students because the attention

of teachers is largely directed toward raising the achievement of CLD underachievers. Also, teachers' lack of knowledge regarding diverse cultures and insufficient preparation for multicultural education can affect their nomination of minority students, worsening the imbalance of racial composition in gifted programs. Banks (2000) maintained that the monoculture curriculum that future educators receive in undergraduate and graduate level teacher preparation programs does not provide them with appropriate skills in educating students with diverse backgrounds. However, the need for multicultural education is urgent because the ethnic compositions of students within school systems are changing dramatically. For example, in 1960, the proportion of White students in the nation's elementary and secondary school population was 86.6%. However, in 2005-06, they comprised 57.1% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006).

### **Deficit Thinking Regarding Diverse Students**

“Educators’ deficit thinking and bias toward CLD students underlies both areas (recruitment and retention) and contributes to the underrepresentation in significant, meaningful ways” (Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008). In this situation, multicultural education theorists maintain that present school practices may reinforce many harmful ethnic stereotypes regarding students and promote discriminatory educational practices. Historically, curricula in schools have concentrated on the culture of Anglo Americans and the school has been an extension of these students’ homes and communities. However, this Anglocentric curriculum has a negative influence on minority students because the culture, values, behavior patterns and languages of these students are significantly different from those within school and in mainstream society. This makes them feel that the school culture is alien and even hostile, which can be connected with their maladjustment (Banks, 2000). In the following paragraphs, we introduce two theories to understand this maladjustment due to disparities in culture and language, ultimately harming the motivation of minority students.

**Paradox of underachievement theory.** Minority students often identify the existence of a discriminatory glass ceiling in school, college, and employment settings although they have the same or higher academic credentials as mainstream students (Feagin, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Additionally, African American students do not show congruence between their academic beliefs and their actual behaviors. For example, they agree that getting good grades in school will increase their chances of going to college and finding a job, however, they do not seem to prioritize school or academics. Consequently, these realities can undermine the motivation and aspiration of African American as well as CLD students who see fewer fruits for their efforts and more hurdles to reach their goals and dreams. In school, when these students are less motivated and isolated from the mainstream school culture, educators are less likely to regard such students as viable candidates for gifted programs, favoring mainstream students as more hard-working and high achieving, active participants. This perception results in low teacher referral rates for minority student placement in gifted programs (Ford, Moore, & Trotman Scott, 2011).

**Involuntary and voluntary minority groups theory.** Because “acting White” is connected with being intelligent, speaking standard English, and getting good grades, many gifted African Americans suffer from the conflict between racial identity and achievement (Day-Vines, Patton & Baytops, 2003). This is summarized in the theory of voluntary and involuntary minority groups. Ogbu (2009) suggests that voluntary minority groups regard America as a land of opportunity. In other words, they have perceptions of optimistic hope and often assimilate, resisting their own culture in hopes of achieving the “American dream”. Voluntary groups also tend to show a pragmatic trust of schools and school personnel, regarding teachers as “useful experts” of the knowledge and language needed to be successful in America.

On the other hand, involuntary minority groups defy assimilation into mainstream culture as many of these families still harbor resentment and

resistance to traditional American beliefs and values due to historical acts of mistreatment (i.e. slavery). These groups often interpret their relationship with schools and educators within the context of enduring historical conflict with mainstream American culture and do not accept that education is the key to success (Ogbu, 2009). Overall, the perception of involuntary minority groups is expressed through equating academic success with "acting White." As a result, negative attitudes toward academic achievement among peers and members of the community compromise student motivation and participation in gifted programs.

However, according to research, African American students have a tendency to be more active and expressive in their learning styles than Anglo-American students (Gay, 2000). Also, Mexican American students tend to be less competitive than Anglo students because traditional Hispanic culture emphasizes collective needs over the needs of the individual (Enriquez & Pajewski, n. d.). As a result, the lack of formal and authentic exposure to multicultural practices or curriculum in teacher preparation courses may result in conflict with minority students, inability to establish rapport, and misinterpretations of their behavior. These factors connected with low expectations from teachers, lead to low recruitment and retention rates for minority students in gifted programs (Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008).

### **Gifted Program Funding Issues**

Funding for gifted programs has been cut and reallocated to programs under NCLB due to political interest in reducing achievement gaps across the nation. In schools with low achievement scores, much more attention is directed toward low-performing students to assist them in achieving a standard level of performance. Consequently, concern regarding the repercussions of failing to meet state and federal standards results in smaller allocations of time and resources to students already performing at high levels (Grgich, 2000). In the absence of federally mandated funding for gifted education services, the long-term stability of gifted

programs depends on the degree to which states provide districts with a reliable budget.

More seriously, The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)'s State of the States in Gifted Education-National Policy and Practice Data (2010-2011) reports that the proportion of expenditures toward gifted programs varies considerably according to state as most states depend on local budgets rather than state funding to support gifted programs and services. In 2010-2011, 10 states reported spending \$0 in state funds for gifted services. Also, of the 26 states that turned in non-zero funding amounts for gifted programs, seven states offered more than \$50 million, while four states spent less than \$1 million. Therefore, state funds budgeted per identified gifted student ranged between less than \$8 and over \$2,500 (NAGC, 2010-2011).

Consequently, gifted programs are caught in the middle of an achievement gap war in America – little funding is directed toward helping students excel beyond the standard level of performance. Subotnik, et al (2011) add: "school-based gifted education receives very little state or federal funding (CSDPG/NAGC, 2009), and schools serving the largest numbers of low socio-economic status (SES) and minority students continue to receive substantially less funding than other institutions, including funding that can support gifted programming" (p. 8) This situation seriously affects opportunities for minority students to receive gifted services and perpetuates the problem of CLD student underrepresentation.

However, Birdsall and Correa (2007) maintain that the correlation between funding and academic outcomes in gifted students becomes apparent when the majority of schools having no interest in identifying CLD students serve such students. Accordingly, they demonstrate a case in California when a male student transferred to another school within his district. His previous school, which was not of high status, diagnosed him as mildly retarded because of his academic history: low grades, disorganized schoolwork, and unclear handwriting. However, his teacher at the new



school recognized some of his characteristics as those of gifted students and arranged a formal assessment. The school and the teacher utilized GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) funding, a block grant for gifted and talented education in California, to identify and serve gifted students among underrepresented student populations. As a result, his test scores were so high that Johns Hopkins provided him with a summer institute scholarship and he is now showing extremely high achievements in science and math (Birdsall & Correa, 2007). As this case indicates, the lack of funding seriously affects opportunities for minority students to receive gifted services. Regarding the case, Sarah (2010) maintains that school funding contributed to making a difference in his education. If he had not been provided the opportunity, his potential abilities would not have been revealed and developed.

### **Lack of Advocacy in and for the CLD Community**

**The insufficiency of teachers with multicultural background.** The lack of hired teachers with diverse cultural backgrounds can affect the underrepresentation of minority students as well. Ford and Trotman (2001) maintained that White Americans compose at least 85 percent of the teaching profession while few minority teachers are present in the American educational system. The essential need to hire and retain minority teachers in education was suggested by Ford (1999), who surveyed minorities about their decision to become gifted education teachers. Consequently, many minority teachers responded that administrators or academic advisors did not recommend them to work in gifted education and some minority teachers even reported that they were discouraged from working with gifted students. However, a sufficient supply of minority teachers can serve to overcome the low enrollment of minority students in gifted programs for the following reasons.

Minority teachers can serve as role models and mentors to CLD students, positively enhancing minority student achievement, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Additionally, minority teachers who relate to and understand minority student experiences with peer pressure (i.e. accusations of “acting White”) can instruct students in coping with such pressure (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford, Moore, & Scott, 2011). Minority teachers are also in a unique position to speak on behalf of disadvantages and difficulties in language and culture for minority students to uncover minority students’ potential and hidden abilities.

**Parental advocacy for diverse gifted students.** The successful navigation of the gifted education system begins with parent advocacy. Discrimination in gifted policy and identification practices such as teacher referrals and testing measures is disregarded unless CLD parents are good advocates for their child’s education. These students are at a disadvantage because of the NCLB system– the world is not full of equal opportunity (Grantham, Frasier, Roberts & Bridges, 2005). However, CLD parents have difficulty in advocating for their children due to the following reasons. First, because CLD parents often suffer from language barriers, they experience difficulty in receiving information about gifted services, voicing their concerns, and expressing opinions related to programs. Second, low-SES CLD parents often have difficulty in being involved in their children’s educational activities because many are working two jobs (Weiss et al., 2003).

Therefore, though under attack in states like Virginia, it is necessary for local advisory boards to step in and help to alleviate problems of teacher referral and identification testing bias by recognizing the needs of CLD gifted students and advocating on their behalf. “State actors make policy decisions that generate, perpetuate, or ameliorate conditions and structures responsible for racial disparities in education” (Mickelson, 2003, p. 1069). Robinson (2003) adds “because of our failure to solve the inequalities of our society -- the first wrong -- we are allowing too many gifted students to be denied an appropriate education-the second wrong” (p. 251). It is time for educators and policy makers to aid in shaping American

educational policies by standing up for gifted children and advocating for the needs of the CLD gifted community.

### **Implications**

In reality, potential gifted minority students are hindered from identification for gifted services and program participation due to language and socio-economic barriers as well as testing and referral bias. As a result, gifted learning, innovation, potential, and creativity of minority students are stifled by the choking pressures of educational policies geared toward maintaining a level of proficiency to reflect the mainstream student population in America. Although policy makers wish to ensure that every child acquires the basic skills needed for successful function in the global economy, the needs of high-performing and gifted students are left largely unmet in schools across the nation. Gentry (2006) maintains that gifted children are equipped with unique skills, experiences, and rates of learning; to expect them to be the same or to perform at the same levels denies the need to help each child reach their fullest potential. NCLB is concerned with group scores and comparisons, however, individual student growth should be the greatest concern. "Of course, poor and minority children are disproportionately affected by these actions, further reinforcing the contention that this legislation hurts the most vulnerable children" (Gentry, 2006, p. 26). We now offer three recommendations regarding methods of identification based on research and theory to enhance the recruitment and retention of diverse gifted students and correct the problem of CLD underrepresentation.

### **Recommendations for CLD Recruitment and Retention**

#### **The Use of Multiple Criteria**

Other than intelligence and achievement tests scores, the following criteria can be added to reverse the underrepresentation of minority students: (1) scores on a creativity test such as the Torrance test (1995), a creative characteristics

rating scale, or evaluations of creative products (2) motivation evaluations based on scores in motivational characteristics scales, or ratings in students' products (3) scores on a behavioral rating scale (4) previous achievements such as awards or honors (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Additionally, states should strive to reinforce the Federal Giftedness Definition (1993) which is not limited to academic areas but expands to diverse areas such as leadership, creative, and /or artistic areas.

#### **The Use of Non-Verbal Tests**

It is necessary to consider non-verbal tests for gifted identification as CLD students may show low performance on state-mandated testing. (Naglier & Ford, 2003). The important merit of non-verbal tests is that they depend less on learned or obtained knowledge than traditional intelligence tests. Therefore, students who do well on non-verbal tests while lacking academic skills may be intelligent gifted underachievers (Ford, 2004). Consequently, non-verbal tests like Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test (NNAT) (Naglieri, 1997) can contribute to finding hidden talent within gifted CLD students to nurture their potential and reverse the problem of CLD underrepresentation.

#### **Multicultural Curriculum Model**

According to a recent study regarding diverse students, the majority (88%) of students who dropped out with passing grades chose insufficiency of relevance in the curriculum as the critical reason for their decision (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). In particular, Banks' (2008) created a model of four levels on how to integrate multicultural content into the curriculum to overcome the lack of cultural relevance due to emphasis on the culture of Anglo Americans.

The first level of "contribution" concentrates on discrete cultural elements such as food, folklore, and fashion. Therefore, students tend to obtain a basic perception about racially and culturally diverse groups. However, in the "additive" level, content, concepts and themes are added into the curriculum and the "transformation" level includes a

change in the structure of the curriculum to enable students to view concepts and issues from diverse cultural perspectives. Finally, at the level of “social action”, students concentrate on solving social issues for equality and equity. Although many stereotypes may be created in the lower levels, the two highest levels provide students with meaningful change in the curriculum. Many researchers maintain that if multiculturalism is missing from the curriculum, the discussion of curriculum for gifted students is not comprehensive (Ford & Harris, 1999). This model is of practical use to educators as they guide students through the four levels, promoting a more multicultural classroom.

### Conclusion

Overall, CLD gifted underrepresentation, although grave in America, brings to light another serious concern: the lack of investment in developing America’s talent to maintain our position in the global economy. Educators and Policymakers alike would be wise to investigate federal and state legislation aimed only at closing the achievement gap while ignoring the high achievers in this country. A collective effort can help to ensure that educational policy reflects American ideals while attending to the needs of all students, regardless of ethnicity, language or background.

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