

Underrepresentation of Minority Students in Gifted and Talented Education

By Lidia T. Anguiano

The purpose of this article is to discuss what gifted and talented education is and why minorities have been consistently under-represented in such programs. Recommendations will be offered to promote a high-quality education for all students regardless of their identification, placement, or ethnicity.

Traditionally, there has been an overrepresentation of minority students in special education. However, there is one aspect of special education in which minorities are underrepresented. Minority students with gifted and talented exceptionalities are underrepresented in special school programs designed to serve this group.

What is Gifted and Talented Education?

A student is considered to be "gifted and talented" when she or he performs at, or has the potential to perform at, a higher intellectual capability than other students of the same age. These students may demonstrate high intellectual, artistic, or cre-

ative capability. Specific selection procedures measure students' academic and intellectual superiority (Pearson et al. 1990). Approximately three to five percent of the general population has gifted and talented exceptionalities.

Students with gifted and talented exceptionalities require special services to meet their needs. The gifted and talented (G.T.) curriculum promotes higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving. In the regular classroom, gifted and talented students are not challenged, and become bored when they have to wait for their peers to acquire certain concepts. When students with gifted and talented exceptionalities are not properly identified, they risk not achieving their academic and social potential.

G.T. classes differ from general education classes because they provide a more individualized and challenging learning environment. G.T. services are either provided in the regular classroom through a special curriculum, or the students are pulled out of the regular classroom to receive instruction.

According to Tracy Weinber (2002), Director of the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented, the most effective means of meeting the needs of these students is through some type of specialized class.

Why is Gifted and Talented Education Considered Special Education?

Gifted and talented education falls under the umbrella of special education because it serves a special population with special educational needs. Specific testing is conducted, and test results are utilized to determine appropriate placement and appropriate services based on each student's needs. Therefore, it is important to be informed of and follow the mandates that oversee G.T. programs and assessment processes.

Causes of Underrepresentation of Minorities in Gifted and Talented Education

Students with gifted and talented exceptionalities come from all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. As there are no inherent intellectual differences among people of different ethnicities, there should be an equal distribution of needs and exceptionalities throughout cultures. When the representation is not in proportion to the population, this brings up the question of unfairness and discriminatory factors which hinder or put minorities at

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a disadvantage (Gallagher, 1995). In the case of minority students, only one half of the eligible students are identified and receive services.

Minority students are underrepresented in G.T. for various reasons. The identification of culturally diverse gifted and talented students is a complex process which must not be taken lightly, and this identification is not always done in the most appropriate manner. Perhaps the most significant reason for this underrepresentation is the use of culturally inappropriate assessment instruments and testing procedures.

It is important to look at the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment instruments and the methods used for identification purposes. This will ensure that students receive the services they need and are entitled to (Pearson, 1990). Testing methods are not always adequate for testing students from diverse backgrounds. Tests may have been normed on a population different from the population being tested.

If practices and procedures favor or privilege a certain group of individuals, it discriminates against other groups. Testing as we know it should only be one part of the criteria utilized when identifying students for placement and services. Students may not be familiar with testing or may view testing differently. Minority students are at a disadvantage when assessment instruments are culturally biased.

Too often, assessments consist of an I.Q. test and achievement tests. According to Gallagher (1995), I.Q. tests indicate the development of intellectual ability at a given point in time, thus predicting success without regard to other factors which may also have an affect on an individual such as societal factors and motivation. Another test commonly used is the Raven Coloured Matrices, which is outdated.

Another important challenge contributing to the underrepresentation of minority groups in gifted and talented education is the language of the assessment. It is common practice to have students write compositions in which their creativity and language use are evaluated. This presents a substantial problem for students who have limited proficiency in the English language.

Challenges Minority Students Face

Another contributing factor for the underrepresentation of minorities in G.T. is that often, children from ethnic minority groups are deprived educationally, environmentally, and economically. Often,

too, their parents are unfamiliar with schools in a new country and the programs and services available to their children. If they are unaware of what is available, they will not push for special programs for their children (Pearson et al, 1990).

For the most part, minorities are challenged from the very beginning, especially those who are faced with having to learn a second language.

Second-language acquisition is a very complex and time-consuming process. Native-like language acquisition can take any where from five to seven years (Collier, 1995). The world does not stand still while one acquires a language. Too often students appear to be speaking and understanding English, when in fact they may only have acquired the social, conversational English and not the cognitive language needed for higher-order, more complex thinking.

According to the 1990 census, 6.3 million young people from ages 5-17 speak a language other than English at home. Over a ten year period, the number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students increased by 38%. Three out of four LEP students speak Spanish as their native language. Interestingly, after being in this country for 15 years, Hispanics speak English on a daily basis. In addition, 70% of their children acquire a dominance of the English language, which often replaces their native language (Crawford, 1997).

Most minorities are also faced with the challenges that accompany having different cultural and life experiences. What may be appropriate in one culture may not be in another. For example, it may not seem appropriate in some cultures for students to be outspoken. Also, as students acquire a second language they must also acquire an additional culture if they are to perform at the level of their peers. Some cultures view education in a more competitive manner than others. In the case of recent immigrants, it is quite possible for the students to have little or no prior schooling, or schooling in the United States may be different from what they are accustomed to.

Too often, students are tested based on nominations from their teacher. And also too often, educators and school administrators are not knowledgeable in the identification of gifted students. As Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) point out, G.T. education is a controversial topic because school personnel and the general public have various misconceptions. In fact, 61% of elementary school teachers reported never having any training in teaching G.T. students (Culross, 1997).

Teacher nominations may also not be

accurate indicators of possible giftedness because a student can be gifted and not have straight A's or be the best behaved. Teachers' perceptions of students' behavior can significantly influence their judgment of scholastic performance (Wong, 1990).

Legal Considerations

So why is there such a concern about minorities in gifted and talented education? Appropriate testing and implementation of gifted and talented programs is not a choice but rather a right. Due to the fact that gifted and talented education is special education, there are specific legal considerations and mandates governing the assessment and implementation of services.

According to *Diana vs. State Board of Education* (1973), assessment must be carried out in the student's primary language. Therefore, the collection of supportive data must document the appropriateness of special education placement of a student. In addition, *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) provides for primary language programs to ensure equal education opportunities for students with special needs. Finally, the 1995 Public Law 93-380 Equal Education Amendment of 1974 stipulates that testing must be conducted in a nondiscriminatory manner (Bullock, 1992).

Recommendation / Conclusion

Gifted and talented education helps all students because the high-achieving students positively impact other students by motivating and raising standards (Oakes, 1985). Too often there is a great deal of misinformation which puts students at a disadvantage. It is important for educators and parents to become more knowledgeable about the various mandates and services available to students based on their needs and exceptionalities.

Social barriers should be eliminated so that the concepts of school and education are no longer thought of as a bureaucracy controlled by educated Whites whom minorities have no right to question. (Nicolau et al, 1990). It would be a great loss to misidentify a gifted and talented student, leaving him or her in a world of boredom and underachievement (Koopman-Dayton & Feldhusen, 1987).

Testing as we know it should only be one part of the criteria utilized to identify and place students needing G.T. services. The process for identifying students should take into account the population being

tested to ensure that assessment is connected directly to what the gifted and talented education program will focus on.

As the number of ethnic minority students continues to grow at a rapid rate in the United States, student diversity needs to be viewed in a positive light, as an asset. We also need to connect the school and community (Minicucci et al, 1995) so that students and parents do not feel alienated. It is important to keep in mind that parents and teachers have one common goal, to ensure that every student reaches his or her academic and social potential. Accessibility to special programs such as gifted and talented education is a worthwhile investment.

Shedding light on issues such as the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted and talented education allows us to understand why this is taking place. Not only do we need to use different tools and assessments; not only do we need to use different assessments; we also need different eyes to measure the strengths of all students (Plummer). Most importantly, this allows us to make positive changes for

the benefit of all students. We cannot allow students to be denied the opportunity to receive the highest quality education available. As Steven Covey (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) put it, "Giving Wings to our children and to others means empowering them with the freedom to rise above negative scripting that had been passed down to us." (Covey, 1990).

Gifted and Talented education is important to us all, because when one student fails in school we all fail and when one student succeeds we all stand to gain.

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