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# *Introduction to Culturally Diverse and Underserved Populations of Gifted Students*

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The issues related to the absence of representative numbers of culturally diverse populations of gifted students in programs for the gifted are highlighted in the twelve seminal journal articles from *Gifted Child Quarterly* during the last two decades. Recommendations for addressing these problems have emerged in the research of several authors, yet lingering concerns remain about the continuing absence of these students in programs for the gifted. The concerns focus on testing strategies, societal pressures, attitudes of teachers, researchers who continue to cite heritability causes, and persons in the community who view programs for the gifted as elitist. To address this continuing concern in the field, recommendations for future action should be based on qualitative and quantitative research as well as longitudinal studies.

The lack of culturally diverse and underserved populations in programs for the gifted is a major concern that has forged dialogues and discussion in *Gifted Child Quarterly* over the past five decades. Although the articles referenced under this topic underscore a basic concern, they barely scratch the surface regarding the many variables and issues that still need to be explored. These

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issues can be classified in three major themes: *identification/selection*, *programming and staff assignment*, and *development*.

The process of **Identification/Selection** has been the Achilles' heel of efforts to show that gifted programs recognize that giftedness can be expressed in many ways. Early efforts to create identification processes that would allow trained teachers or staff to locate gifted children who might not have scored high on the regular IQ or achievement tests proved very beneficial. Early work by Renzulli and Hartman (1971) and Baldwin (1977) to broaden the process for identifying gifted students gave school districts a much needed alternative to using only IQ or achievement tests to select students thus giving minority students a better chance of being selected. Clarke (1988) organized identification processes used in school districts classifying them as either used for screening or for identification. She designed an identification matrix, but placed the majority of the processes in the matrix under screening techniques. Few of the alternative forms were placed under identification, which narrowed the choices used to *identify* giftedness. Although procedures outside of the usual academic or IQ testing are still being suggested as alternatives, a strong dependence remains on the use of IQ tests, as does a belief that they are more relevant for identification techniques.

**Programming** should offer a continuum of services that recognize the abilities of students who are culturally diverse, as opposed to limited program offerings designed for "one-size-fits-all." Little attention has been given to using students' strengths in the screening or identification process as a catalyst to help students succeed in the areas of their weaknesses. Most of the programming was based on a deficit model where expectations were low or content was "dumbed down." Appropriate curriculum models and scheduling have been used more as an organizational imperative rather than a theoretically sound strategy for meeting the needs of these students. This inappropriate approach to programming placed the minority student at a double disadvantage.

**Staffing** for classes of the gifted has constituted another issue related to the inclusion of this population, but an even more important variable is the attitude or mindset of the researcher who develops theories and conducts the research that addresses these concerns. Gifted programs, as a whole, have a low percentage of minority staff members that ironically coincides with the low percentage of minority students in programs for the gifted. The attitudes of both minority as well as the usual majority staff members influence all aspects of programming for students. Minority staff might consider such programs "elitist," whereas majority staff members believe that giftedness rests in the ability to succeed in specific academic courses singularly or in combination. Teacher education programs have been slow to include courses and requirements about the education of gifted students. This has been the source of misunderstandings or preconceived notions about the existence of giftedness in minority students.

Politically correct terminology has evolved over the years in these seminal articles, using words such as disadvantaged, minority, black, African American, culturally diverse, underserved, culturally deprived, and ethnic minority. Although the use of "African American" is currently popular, the term "black"

was used when the article titled "I am black but look at me, I am also gifted" (Baldwin, 1987) was written. Reissman (1962) posited a definition of "culturally deprived," defining it as a group of cultural and racial minorities; however, as the nomenclature changes, the use of the term culturally deprived changed its original intent and became a term that implied a deprived culture for these groups. Although a variety of these terms are used interchangeably in this introductory chapter, they all refer to students who are underserved and/or unrepresented in classes for the gifted.

## INCLUSION

Scott, Deuel, Jean-Francois, and Urbano (1996) point out that "in the United States of America, children from culturally different and/or low socioeconomic environments constitute a growing percentage of all students, yet assessment tools that effectively evaluate their academic potential are lacking" (p. 147).

One strong theme that continues to surface is that heritability is one reason for the lack of success among African Americans to score well on IQ tests. However, recent evidence suggests that scores on tests often do not indicate the potential of these students. Jensen (1998), in his most recent book, *The G factor: The science of mental ability*, has provided a detailed review of the role that heredity plays in the abilities of various racial or ethnic groups. He stated that, "Individual differences in mental test scores have a substantial genetic component indexed by the coefficient of heritability (in the broad sense)" (p. 169, suggesting a hierarchical list of the mental abilities among various ethnic and racial groups. Baldwin and Start (1987) studied 57 inner city minority students using methods suggested by Jensen and had different findings. Unlike other Jensen research projects showing a high correlation between the button box results, the academic achievement tests, and the Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM), a correlation was not found with these students. Jensen had posited that correlations with the SPM, a non-verbal test, would bolster his argument that the depressed scores on various intelligence tests were not related to lack of background in school-related subjects or other societal concerns but in fact were related to heredity. Although the findings of this research cannot be generalized to a larger population, the use of the SPM did help to identify some students in this population who had not been selected for the gifted program due to lower test scores but who should have been considered for selection in programs for the gifted.

## PROGRAMMING

A case study conducted by Baldwin (1977) shows the effects of a stimulating classroom on the success of an all-black class of students who did not fit the IQ profile of gifted students. The research contradicts the validity of IQ scores determining whether or not students of this ethnic group are gifted. She cited the case study of 24 fourth-grade black students who would not have been

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admitted to a program for the gifted without an advocate who saw potential in them, and developed a stimulating environment in which the innate abilities of these students could flourish. The original IQ scores on the Slosson test, which ranged from 100–180, did not indicate the potential of these students; however, a six-year follow-up study revealed that all of the students were in college with substantial scholarship awards in various parts of the country. A follow-up study (Baldwin, 2003) with these students as adults indicated that they perceived that success in their chosen careers resulted from the extended opportunities that further developed their abilities through challenges and high expectations as members of this class for the gifted. One adult male student indicated that this class resolved the lack of challenge in his original placement in school, and changed his peer groups. He also indicated that this class even kept him from joining a gang.

The students in the case study were given an opportunity to design experiments, challenge ideas, conduct research, and challenge their own skills and abilities. The unique ability of each student was viewed as a strength and used as a catalyst for developing or enhancing individual areas of weaknesses. The teacher acted as a facilitator, and worked with the students to develop their skills. One student, who is now a political advisor, indicated that in his writing class he wrote to various embassies around the world for information on aspects of the particular country. He was required to give an oral report to the class on his findings and this helped him overcome his shyness and provided him with additional knowledge about how to secure resources of information that he still finds useful today. It also gave him an opportunity to reflect and assess how he had learned. “Recent research in cognitive psychology applied to education has supported the notion that children benefit from instructional approaches that help them reflect upon their own learning processes” (Marzano, 1988, as cited in Armstrong, 1994).

## ATTITUDES

Attitudes about conceptions of intelligence must be changed as Baldwin (1987) has suggested. Research in this volume verified the need for attitude adjustments for a wider view of intelligence by teachers and administrators who develop criteria and procedures for inclusion of students in programs for the gifted. According to the research by Tomlinson, Callahan, and Lelli (1997), this attitude adjustment includes involvement of parents, mentors, and the need for curricula that are flexible and bring attention to the many ways intelligence can be exhibited. In the district in which this research was completed, a high percentage of minorities were not included in the gifted program. This research was designed to help teachers understand this problem and find ways to support gifted students in this district through Project START (Support To Affirm Rising Talent). The case studies presented discuss what recognition of worth and potential can achieve for minority group children. As the authors explained:

When a teacher begins to think about a child in more positive than negative ways, when a classroom becomes more flexible, when a parent hears a message from school that a child is worth special investment, when the doors to school seem open and inviting, when someone from outside the school comes and spends time with a child, important transformations occur. . . . Students who may face life “with their dukes up” because of the tensions which surround them find school a more inviting place and home a bit more hopeful (p. 17).

Following this idea, Baldwin (1984) discussed some assumptions that should be considered as an important part of attitude adjustments, including that

- Giftedness expressed in one dimension is just as important as giftedness expressed in another.
- Giftedness can be expressed through a variety of behaviors.
- Giftedness in any area can be a clue to the presence of potential giftedness in another area, or a catalyst for the development of giftedness in another area.
- A total ability profile is crucial in the educational planning for the gifted child.
- Carefully planned subjective assessment techniques can be used effectively in combination with objective assessment techniques.
- All populations have gifted children who exhibit behaviors that are indicative of giftedness.
- Behaviors classified as gifted should be above and beyond the average of a broad spectrum of individuals. (p. 3)

The process for changing attitudes and recognizing potential in minority students should begin in kindergarten. In this volume, an article written by Scott, et al. (1996) discussed research conducted with four hundred regular education kindergarten students and thirty-one kindergarten students selected for gifted programs. Using a battery of nine cognitive tasks, the researchers showed that this method could be used to identify more ethnic minority children. The authors demonstrated an unusual philosophical perspective regarding the development of a new type of test to identify children from ethnic minority groups, suggesting that

although the current trend is to consider giftedness to reflect multiple characteristics and to define it, therefore, in terms of multiple criteria . . . it is not necessarily the case that one would want to develop a new test that attempts to identify all children falling under such an inclusive concept. Rather, one may attempt to develop a new test that more effectively identifies a subgroup of gifted children . . . those who will excel in the academic domain. To find this type of gifted student, one must

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assess cognitive processes since cognitive competency can be expected to relate to academic performance (p. 148).

These researchers used a more effective method to select minority students who had the potential for academic excellence as a result of effective and stimulating classroom activities. The findings of this study were preliminary but showed that gifted, minority children could be identified in kindergarten using a brief battery of cognitive tasks. Early identification could place children on the track toward academic success in school.

Kirschenbaum (1998) used dynamic assessment as a diagnostic procedure for finding the potential of students who might not have had educational opportunities due to poor schooling or societal handicaps. According to Vygotsky's (1978) philosophy, stimulating cognitive ability by instructing students on how to perform certain tasks, measuring their progress, and then solidifying what they have learned by solving similar problems reflects the underlying zone of proximal development that encourages teachers to continue to assist the child to move beyond his present ability level. The test-intervention retest process provides support and helps students move to a higher "zone" that is indicative of their potential.

## COMMUNITY AND PEER EXPECTATIONS

Another area of concern in research centers around the dilemmas in which male minorities often find themselves when living within their ethnic communities. The attitude of the community may put pressure on black males in gifted classes or programs, causing them to deny their giftedness and refuse to take advantage of the opportunity to delve into more challenging material. This community pressure, however, is not limited to males. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) discovered in their research that black girls also felt pressure to hide their giftedness. Minority gifted students may feel pressured to reject any attempts to develop their intellectual skills because these are the "white man's" activities that should not be followed. Ogbu (1995) has written about "... psychological pressures against 'acting white' that are just as effective in discouraging involuntary minority students from striving for academic success. ... The dilemma of involuntary minority students is that they may have to choose between 'acting white' ... and 'acting black'" (p. 588). Ogbu defines involuntary minorities as those "who were originally brought to the United States or any other society against their will" (p. 585).

Hébert (2000) has shown in his study of urban males that participating in activities outside of the ethnic group, a strong belief in self and the development of friends of all ethnic groups, and strong family support provided them the inner strength to resist the pressure to reject attempts to develop their intellectual ability. Additionally, Hébert and Beardsley (2001) conducted a case study research to review the role that teachers, parents, and community members

played in the development of abilities of rural students. This case study of a rural black male who overcame the inhibiting factors in his environment indicated that rural poverty could have a debilitating influence on students. In spite of these obstacles, students who grow up in impoverished backgrounds often display the ability to rise above these circumstances and exude self-confidence when their families, teachers, and communities give them emotional support. Poverty can deny a student some material things but an active mind and heart can be nourished creatively. Mentors can also be very important in the development of the abilities of children in similar circumstances.

## LIMITING CIRCUMSTANCES

In Patton, Prillaman, and VanTassel-Baska's 1990 article, the philosophical underpinnings of the processes used to select students for gifted and talented classes were discussed. Interestingly enough, the propositions regarding diversity were evident in written program documents, but decisions regarding the funding and the structural processes often resulted in the use of traditional methods for selecting minority students. The sample in this national study included documents from fifty states and territories. With the latest national push for "no child left behind," many state educators felt compelled to use more traditional test procedures to ensure continued funding. This hampers the creative process needed to alleviate the problem to ensure that no **gifted** child is being left behind.

Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1983) featuring his Seven-Plus intelligences (presently including 2 more) has become a vehicle by which multiple criteria are used to create more inclusive identification and programming processes. Although efforts to design assessment techniques and classroom activities representing these intelligences are currently widely used, this concept should first help change the theories and philosophies regarding intelligence rather than to change the design of classroom activities.

In my own work in this area (1994), I investigated the work of teachers who explored a wide range of abilities and interests using Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences. These teachers increased the number of minority primary-grade students who were included in gifted classes; however, problems emerged for these students at the fourth-grade level when more traditional methods of selection were used. Some students assessed by the standard IQ test were denied admission due to their evaluation scores. As an evaluator of the program, I found that in spite of this let down, changes occurred with parents, teachers, and students as a result of this experimental program. There were perceptible changes in the students who entered the fourth grade whether in gifted classes or the regular classes. The changes were seen in self-assurance, task commitment, and skill levels for the students. Teachers became more sensitive to the qualities that indicated giftedness and the processes advocating for those students. Parents became more active in advocating for their students as well and are becoming more

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involved with their schoolwork. These student changes were similar to those found by Díaz (1998) whose research emphasized the critical importance of early curricular enrichment and talent development. Her research found that the underachievement of gifted and talented culturally diverse students stemmed from low self-efficacy (which may have been an outcome of family situations), school counseling procedures, teachers who lack awareness of the needs of these students, hostile community environments, language differences, and prejudice. These variables led to disruptive behaviors, defensive attitudes, and ultimately, the underachievement of high school students.

## FUTURE WORK

Addressing issues related to the population of underserved students requires an in-depth examination of the intervening variables that play an important role in understanding and solving the problems. Much work remains in each of the areas discussed in this introduction, and the questions that emerge call for both qualitative and quantitative research.

- How effective is the identification and placement of minority students in classes in which expectations of success are based on experiences that the majority students have had? Are preparatory classes needed to increase the likelihood for the success of these students? Would this be a politically correct procedure to embrace?
- What curriculum design and teaching strategies are most effective in working with students from different racial and ethnic groups?
- What role does or should the community play in supporting the minority students who show exceptional ability?
- Does current brain research help answer some of the questions about ability and learning potential?
- How can creativity be used as an assessment tool for identification? What role does creativity play in the intellectual quotient?
- Is it possible to, and should we, eliminate IQ tests as an indicator of giftedness?

These questions, and many others, must be asked to more adequately meet the needs of diverse students. Hopefully, future teachers and researchers in gifted education will find answers that can be embraced by educators, communities, and families, and that the needs of these students will be more effectively met in their classrooms.

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