



Meeting the Needs of Gifted and Talented Minority Language Students: Issues and Practices

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Introduction

Students with special gifts and talents come from all cultural and linguistic groups. Gifted students can be described as possessing an abundance of certain abilities that are most highly valued within a particular society or culture. Many minority language children have special talents that are valued within their own cultures; unfortunately, these students are often not recognized as gifted and talented.

Most procedures for identifying gifted and talented students have been developed for use with native English speaking, middle class children. Such procedures have led to an under-representation of minority language students in gifted and talented programs, which in turn prevents our schools from developing the strengths and abilities of this special population.

This paper explores the controversy surrounding the under-representation of minority language students in gifted and talented programs and also makes recommendations for more suitable assessment techniques and program models.

What are the different definitions of giftedness and how do they affect minority language students?

There is an ongoing debate in the field of education about which students should be considered gifted. Are gifted students those who score within the top one to three percent on IQ tests, or are there other ways to identify giftedness? Should programs be developed to accommodate only the more traditionally defined gifted students or to serve a broader "able learner" group? How does the definition of giftedness affect the types of programs which can be implemented?

It is important to define giftedness clearly because the definition affects the identification and assessment process as well as the instructional design of the program. For example, if giftedness is defined solely by IQ, then the program is likely to focus on different instructional objectives than a program where the definition of giftedness combines academic, leadership, and creative abilities.

The concept of giftedness has changed and expanded through the years. Terman (1926) describes gifted and talented children as those who are in "the top one percent level in general intellectual ability, as measured by the Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale, or a comparable instrument." This definition perpetuated the notion of giftedness as synonymous with high IQ for many years.

A more recent definition by Witty (1958) views giftedness more broadly: "There are children whose

outstanding potentialities in art, in writing, or in social leadership can be recognized largely by their performance." Based in part on the work of Witty and other researchers, the current definition of giftedness adopted by many states and school districts throughout the country is that of the U.S. Office of Education (now the Department of Education):

Gifted and talented children are those ... who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children and youth whose abilities, talents, and potential require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided in order to realize their potential contribution to self and society.

Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas:

- general intellectual ability;
- specific academic aptitude;
- creative or productive thinking;
- leadership ability;
- visual and performing arts; and
- psychomotor ability. (p. 181)

This definition represents a significant move away from Terman's definition because it does not include specific levels or cut-off scores, and it increases the number of ability areas from one to six (Melesky 1984).

Joseph Renzulli, a noted researcher and practitioner in the area of education for the gifted and talented, presents a more practical approach to giftedness (1978). His three-ring conceptualization defines giftedness as a combination of above average ability, creativity, and task commitment. No single trait determines giftedness, since research has found little relationship between test scores/school grades and real work accomplishments. Renzulli further argues that the education of gifted and talented students should encourage the development of all three characteristics in each person (Renzulli, 1978).

Barstow (in Dannenberg, 1984) accepts Renzulli's model but suggests that two additional factors -- language and cultural background -- are of critical importance when working with minority language students. Barstow's adaptation states that gifted and talented students may possess a combination of above average ability, task commitment, creativity, language skill, and unique cultural background. A broader definition of giftedness like Barstow's can lead to the identification of more gifted and talented students, including students from minority language populations.

Why are minority language students under-represented in gifted and talented programs?

Educators who work closely with minority language students argue that using standardized IQ tests as a primary measure of giftedness does not fairly accommodate the linguistic and cultural differences of these students. These educators look to identify the "able learner" rather than the more narrowly defined gifted student who scores in the top 3% on IQ tests. Able learners are defined by some educators as students in the top 10% of their class who have shown some extraordinary achievement in one or more areas such as science, mathematics, or the performing arts (Dr. Ernest Bernal, personal communication, September 13, 1988).

Reliance on IQ tests alone has greatly diminished the potential number of all gifted students. Renzulli indicates that "more [numbers and percentages] creative persons come from below the 95th percentile than above it, and if such cut-off scores are needed to determine entrance into special programs, we may be guilty

of actually discriminating against persons who have the highest potential for high levels of accomplishment" (1978: 182).

Three percent is a conservative estimate of the percentage of the population that is considered gifted. However, in Arizona, for example, only 0.14% of the students in gifted and talented programs come from language minority backgrounds (Maker, 1987). Using the 3% criterion, one would estimate that 2,900 limited English proficient (LEP) students in Arizona could be receiving some type of services for giftedness. An assessment of needs, however, revealed that only 143 LEP children were participating in gifted programs, despite the fact that minority language students represent 16.17% (96,674) of the school age population. Other studies indicate that the proportion of Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians identified as gifted represents only half the expected. (Chan and Kitano, 1986).

The following table illustrates that, nationwide, Caucasians and Asians are over-represented, while the percentage of Blacks and Hispanics is only half what would be expected in gifted and talented programs.

PERCENTAGE OF MINORITY STUDENTS ENROLLED
IN REGULAR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Minority Group	General Enrollment	Enrollment in Gifted Programs
Caucasians	71.62%	81.4%
Blacks	16.2%	8.4%
Hispanics	9.1%	4.7%
Asians	2.5%	5.0%

SOURCES: Zappia in press, Machado, 1987.

The concept of giftedness as it relates to culture and values can help explain why more gifted and talented Asian and Pacific-American students have been identified than any other group. Although these children comprise only 2.2% of the school-age population, they constitute 4.4% of the identified gifted and talented Asian and Pacific-American students have been identified than any other group. Although these children comprise only 2.2% of the school-age population, they constitute 4.4% of the identified gifted students, twice the expected number (Kitano, 1986). (This figure is slightly lower than the statistic given in the table above [2.5%], but the table above has more recent data). The traditional Asian values of educational attainment and obedience to authority support achievement in American schools, despite the fact that Asian and Pacific-American cultures differ in many ways from the majority culture.

Different learning styles as well as different cultural values may also contribute to the under representation of gifted and talented minority language students. Native Americans are often caught between the school's value of independence and the home and community value of independence. In school, students, generally sit in rows and face the teacher, whereas in Native American culture, everyone would be seated in a circle and decisions would be made collectively.

Among many hispanics, cultural differences may also produce giftedness that differs from the traditional manifestations of giftedness in the majority culture. In Puerto Rico, for example, children learn to seek the advice of their family rather than act independently (Perrone and Aleman, 1983). Respect for elders is often valued more than precociousness, which can be seen as disrespectful. Similarly, the Mexican-American child who respects elders, the law, and authority becomes vulnerable in a school system which values individual

competition, initiative, and self-direction.

What are some commonly used techniques for the identification of gifted and talented minority language students?

Research on the identification of giftedness points to the lack of appropriate assessment procedures. Giftedness is not a trait inherent to native English speakers, but there is a lack of instruments which can detect giftedness in minority language students ([Gallagher, 1979](#), [Llanes, 1980](#), [Raupp, 1988](#), [Renzulli, et al., 1981](#)). Most tests rely on either oral or written language skills. Minority language students who are not considered gifted may in fact be very gifted, but are unable to express themselves in English. Therefore, many researchers urge that great caution should be exercised in using English standardized tests for the identification of linguistic and cultural minority students. These researchers also recommend selecting tests that reduce cultural and linguistic bias.

The identification and assessment of gifted and talented students is complex because it involves students who are both gifted and talented and from a language or cultural background different from middle class, native-English-speaking children. Many researchers and practitioners recommend multiple assessment measures to give students several opportunities to demonstrate their skills and performance potential.

Each school can establish its own relevant criteria to ensure that the screening process is appropriate for a specific target population. Moreover, an assessment team can represent the population to be served in the program and can be sensitive to their needs. In addition, teachers can be brought into the identification process because they have the opportunity to observe students in numerous academic and social situations.

An alternative to using English language standardized tests is the assessment of LEP students in their native language. These tests measure a variety of skills: creative thinking skills such as fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration; intellectual development based on Piaget's theory of development ([1954, 1973](#)), language proficiency; and non-verbal perceptual skills of cognitive development.

Many school districts now include behavioral checklists or inventories, nominations, or related techniques to identify gifted and talented minority language students. Checklists usually compare or rate the student according to general descriptions or more specific examples of behavior deduced from characteristics of gifted persons. Many of these instruments are designed locally, or available from state departments of education, or available commercially.

Other commonly used methods such as interviews, self-reports, autobiographies, and case histories can also be used to identify gifted and talented minority language students. Interviews are often scheduled as part of the identification or selection process to determine a candidate's general fitness for a program and provide information for instructional planning. The use of case studies to identify giftedness has been documented by Renzulli and Smith (1977) and is recommended because it relies on multiple sources of information about a student's performance. Although these procedures can be cumbersome, time consuming, and complex, they can provide the most valid basis for decision making.

What types of programs are available for gifted and talented students and are they suitable for minority language students who are selected to participate?

There are as many different types of programs and instructional models for gifted and talented LEP students as there are different views of intelligence. The program models discussed in this paper demonstrate a wide range of suggestions for choosing a program for gifted and talented students. Each district must implement the

program that will best meet the needs of their gifted and talented minority language students. The programs listed here can stimulate ideas about the types of programs which can be implemented, and have been implemented by other school districts.

Jean M. Blanning of the Connecticut Clearinghouse for the Gifted and Talented ([1980](#)) suggests that, in general, programs for gifted and talented minority language students should allow their students to:

- pursue topics in depth at a pace commensurate with their abilities and intensity of interest;
- explore, branch out on tangents unforeseen when first beginning a study, without curriculum parameters confining them to a particular direction;
- initiate activities, diverge from the structured format, within a framework of guidance and resources appropriate for such exploration;
- ask questions about areas or aspects of studies and find answers which lead to more questions;
- experience emotional involvement with a project because it is based on interests and use of higher levels of ability;
- learn the skills, methodology and discipline involved in intellectual pursuits and/or creative endeavors;
- think (interpretations, connections, extrapolations) and imagine (ideas, images, intuitive insights) to develop fully into their own products; and
- experience the use of intellectual and senses necessary in all creative endeavors.

Enrichment Programs

The most common program model for gifted and talented students is probably an enrichment program, where students receive instruction in addition to their regular classroom instruction. Enrichment programs provide learning experiences which are designed to extend, supplement, or deepen understandings within specific content areas ([Dannenberg, 1984](#)). Some enrichment programs provide academic services and cultural opportunities for gifted and talented students.

Gifted and talented LEP students at Louis S. Brandeis High School in New York City attend operas and museums and, in this way, become a part of American culture. Students have said that the program has made them feel "special," because they visit places they ordinarily would not. Another example of activities in an enrichment program would be to have students studying the prehistoric era watch films on dinosaurs, draw pictures of them, and go to a natural history museum to see a dinosaur exhibit.

Deciding whether or not to implement an enrichment program may be greatly affected by one's concept of giftedness. If giftedness is considered a quality to be measured through IQ tests, then perhaps an enrichment program would be seen as a "frill" because it does not concentrate strictly on academics. On the other hand, this program may be particularly appreciated by the gifted and talented minority language students, since they often do not receive this sort of exposure to the arts in a standard instructional program.

Resource Rooms

Another program model uses a resource room, which is usually staffed by a resource teacher. Students may visit the resource room to do special assignments or to check out various educational games or puzzles. In a kindergarten-first grade gifted and talented program in Albuquerque, New Mexico, parents are also able to check out items for their children. The resource room provides an excellent opportunity for parents and students to bridge the gap between home and school. However, in many inner city schools, special programs may be needed to obtain the desired levels of parental support. Also, the establishment of a resource room usually requires a resource teacher who has expertise in the area of gifted and talented students, physical space for the room, and sufficient operating funds.

The Hartford, Connecticut, program, "Encendiendo Una Llama," ("Lighting a Flame") had been in operation since 1979 and uses a resource room, an after-school program, and a regular classroom component to provide services for gifted and talented minority language students. This program emphasizes language development (in English and Spanish), higher level thinking skills, and development of creative thinking. It is an integrated program as English dominant children also participate. In each of the participating Hartford schools, the bilingual gifted and talented program is the only gifted program in the school, and all children are eligible to participate, regardless of their language background.

Parental Involvement Programs

Many programs include a strong parent involvement component. In this way, parents can help support their children's development at home while the school can be used as an additional resource. Although it is important for all parents to be involved in their children's education, it is particularly critical for parents of gifted and talented minority language children to develop a strong link between the home and the school.

Many programs provide parents with checklists to help assess their children. In addition, programs often provide booklets of home activities through which parents can encourage critical thinking and creativity.

Acceleration or Honors Programs

Many people associate acceleration or honors programs with gifted and talented programs. These programs may include skipping grades, early entrance, early graduation, credit by examination, non-graded classes, and advanced placement classes ([Dannenberg, 1984](#)). Some gifted students who seem bored in school may benefit from an accelerated program that provides an academic challenge and keeps them involved in school. However, it may be difficult to identify these students who may not be initially seen as gifted.

Some educators who adhere to the narrow definition of giftedness as high IQ may not feel that an honors program is appropriate for students who fit the broader definition of the able learner. This attitude is refuted in the film *Stand and Deliver* which is based on a true story about several minority language students at an inner city school in Los Angeles. These students were not considered gifted by many of their teachers, yet they were the only students in their school to pass the Advanced Placement exams given by the Educational Testing Service for college credit in calculus. Their success can be attributed largely to their mathematics teacher, Mr. Jaime Escalante, who had very high expectations for them and refused to believe that they were unable to think critically simply because they were from low-income, minority language backgrounds. He encouraged their participation in these special advanced classes (held at night and on Saturdays in overcrowded, stifling hot classrooms) to prove to other students, the faculty, and to themselves that they were intelligent. Moreover, these students gained new, strong self-concepts, which inevitably improved their academic skills and gave them the courage and discipline to pursue college.

Mentor Programs

Another program model for gifted and talented education is the mentor program. Mentors provide a role model for the students, giving them an opportunity to interact with adult professionals. Through the Higher Achievement Program in Washington, DC, elementary and junior high school students from low-income neighborhoods are tutored by volunteers two nights a week. To be eligible for the program, students must show a high level of motivation and pass a qualifying exam. One night each week is devoted to verbal skills such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing; the second night is devoted primarily to math and related skills. Critical thinking skills are stressed in all subjects.

The mentor program has many psychological and social benefits for the students and is a low cost program if the school district recruits area professionals as volunteers. School districts located near universities can encourage them to establish a course in which official credit is given to university students who participate as mentors. If the mentors are sensitive to the needs of particular cultural and linguistic groups, they can provide positive role models for the students. The mentor program concept can be a solution to difficult budget constraints and has been used by numerous school districts around the country.

Recommendations for change

The following recommendations may improve the assessment and educational programs of gifted and talented minority language students:

Broaden the concept of giftedness

Broadening the concept of giftedness to include able learners will allow for the identification of a greater proportion of gifted minority language students. A broader definition of giftedness may be the first essential step toward identifying and educating gifted and talented minority language students.

Expand research on giftedness and minority language students

Although there is a large body of literature on gifted and talented students in general, there is much less literature on gifted and talented minority language students. This may be because many researchers had not considered minority language students as gifted, based on the traditional measure of giftedness as a high IQ score. Further research is needed on all the able learners in our schools, including minority language students.

Employ more well-rounded assessment techniques

Steps can be taken to identify more gifted and talented minority language students and offer services to them. If there is a lower proportion of minority language students identified as gifted, then the identification/assessment process can be examined to determine why these students have not been identified. School districts may need to find creative solutions to the problem of how to identify gifted and talented minority language students using non-traditional methods.

The identification of minority language students can include multiple criteria (with information from as many sources as possible) that are relevant to the needs of the population. Using multiple instruments can result in a more precise picture of the minority language student because it provides information about students from different perspectives. Also, a combination of assessment instruments can help ensure that a student's ability to effectively participate in a gifted and talented program is adequately measured.

Increase staff awareness of its own potential for developing a gifted and talented program

Regardless of the program model that is selected for implementation, administrators must first examine the resources they have within their school system. Upon entering the school district, for example, teachers could be asked to complete a questionnaire about their abilities and interests and whether or not they would be interested in participating in a gifted and talented program. For example, a teacher who has played piano for 10 years might be very interested in teaching a course in music appreciation. But if the administrator did not even know that the teacher played piano, how would he or she know that the teacher might be interested? Administrators need to be more aware of the unique talents within their own staff to identify local personnel from within the school system who may be able to contribute their time, effort, and expertise to gifted and talented programs.

Explore various program models

No single model can be recommended as the "best" instructional approach for gifted and talented minority language students, because each population is unique and each program has its own specific goals and objectives. The type of program implemented may depend on several issues, such as the instructional model,

the talents of the students, the number of gifted students identified, the talents of the professional staff, the availability of personnel, the level of commitment of the school and the school system, and budget constraints.

Increase awareness of different ways giftedness may be manifested in different populations

Many students are gifted or talented. Teachers face the challenge of identifying, developing, and supporting their students' talents. Although this may be a challenge, it is also a rewarding experience. Watching students grow to their fullest potential and knowing that as the teacher, you have played an integral part in your students' growth, are two marks of a great personal and professional triumph.

Conclusion

This paper highlights some of the current debates in the education of gifted and talented students focusing on the definition of giftedness, the assessment of gifted students, and the development and implementation of gifted programs. Providing appropriate gifted and talented programs for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds is a challenge that many school districts face. As minority language students represent an increasing percentage of the total school population, meeting the educational needs of gifted minority language students is vital. All students benefit from quality instruction; all students, including minority language students, deserve the most challenging instruction possible.

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