

Increasing Diversity in Gifted Programs

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In 1994, the Federal government revised the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act, expanding its definition of giftedness to explicitly assert that gifted youth are present within every ethnicity and across all levels of economic strata. However, ethnic minorities, particularly Black and Hispanic, and youth that come from a low socioeconomic status (SES), are drastically underrepresented in gifted programs. For the purposes of this paper, giftedness will be assumed to refer to high academic aptitude, not high academic achievement. The two are similar, but different, phenomena.

According to the Department of Education's 1991 National Educational Longitudinal Study of 8th grade gifted programs, students coming from the highest SES quartile were nearly *five* times more likely to be participating in gifted programs than youth from the lowest SES quartile. Additionally, the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education (1979) published a report stating that Blacks and Hispanics were proportionately underrepresented nationwide by 30-70% in gifted programs. It should also be noted that there is frequently overlap between minorities and low SES; proportionately, there is an overrepresentation of ethnic minorities within lower SES.

There are numerous hypothesized reasons for why this disparity exists, such as lack of funding, test bias, underachievement in school, and cultural differences in the level of social support for academic achievement. Unfortunately, there are also many factors that have yet to be investigated that may play a role in underrepresentation. For example, within this population, lack of familiarity with the potential benefits of participation may be causing diminished participation in gifted programs. Further, those students who are able to overcome the aforementioned barriers and are actually identified as gifted may suffer from higher than normal drop out rates of gifted programs. To date, neither of these topics has been researched.

In addition to reaping the potential educational and personal benefits of participating in gifted programs (e.g. high self-esteem, positive peer groups) there are distinct negative consequences when youth are not appropriately labeled as gifted. Failing to properly identify can result in boredom, frustration, disinterest in school related learning, early underachievement, lack of motivation, and failure to realize their full potential (Louis, Subotnik, Breland, & Lewis, 2000). Because such negative consequences loom with failure to satisfy the scholastic needs of gifted youth, proper identification is crucial to the educational well-being of all potentially gifted students.

Current efforts to reduce the inequalities in gifted participation include the use of parent nomination, teacher nomination, and alternative standardized tests. These criteria are believed to give a broader perspective of potential students' abilities and overcome/sidestep many of the hurdles frequently encountered by underrepresented

youth. However, these efforts are plagued with flaws. For example, a survey of Black, Hispanic, and White parents of youth participating in a gifted program showed that minority parents were less likely to take advantage of their nominating ability (Scott, et al., 1992). When controlling for student IQ and prior parental "awareness" of giftedness, White parents were 1.5-2 times as likely to ask for an evaluation of their child's abilities as Hispanic and Black parents.

Additionally, teachers have been found to be inconsistent and unreliable nominators for general giftedness unless they have been appropriately trained. Gear (1978) found that without training, teachers were not nominating students with high potential; they were merely selecting well-behaved students with good grades. After a brief training program, teacher nomination effectiveness more than doubled.

A key to increasing participation among underrepresented youth and alleviating hypothesized high drop out rates is educating parents of the characteristics of a gifted child and the content and benefits of gifted programs. Information should include curricula of the gifted program, as well as the academic, personal, and social influence participation can have on youth. Educating parents will both assist them in making better nominations and lead to greater parental support for children who eventually participate in gifted programs. A comparison of parent nomination rates before and after the information dissemination would demonstrate potential progress in the nominating procedure.

Moreover, records of gifted program drop out rates as well as data documenting why students decide to not participate in gifted programs would reveal the degree of success or failure of an information campaign.

Proportionate acceptance levels are not enough to create equality of education for all. If high drop out rates of underrepresented youth immediately follow identification as gifted, the efforts to attain equality are wasted. The ultimate goal is to foster equal educational outcomes. Increasing teacher training and parental knowledge will help diversify the identification process while establishing records of drop out rates and reasons will illuminate participation barriers. These actions will provide insight into why this disparity exists, as well as increase participation of underrepresented students in gifted education.

References

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