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Increasing the Representation of Minority Students in Gifted and Talented Education Programs

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INCREASING THE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITY STUDENTS IN GIFTED AND

TALENTED EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Underrepresentation of Minorities in Gifted and Talented Programs

The Supreme Court's decision in the historic landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) "represents the most significant ruling in the history of the Supreme Court on equal educational opportunity. It is the cornerstone of all subsequent legal developments ensuring the rights of disenfranchised groups" (Ford & Webb, 1994, p. 359). However, despite the ruling that separate was not equal and segregation would no longer be an acceptable practice, disparities can be found in education, especially in regards to minority representation in gifted and talented programs. This literature review addresses the issue of determining the best practices for identifying, recruiting and retaining gifted and talented minority students so as to avoid disproportionate representation within gifted and talented programs, as well as a discussion of probable causes for the disproportionality. For purposes of this study, a minority is defined as those individuals of African American, Hispanic and/or Native American descent, as these groups have been extensively studied within the existing body of literature available.

As a special education teacher, this topic is of particular interest to me. Gifted education lies on the same spectrum as special education in that it provides specialized instruction for students above and beyond what is traditionally found within a classroom setting. What I found in my experience has been that my colleagues and I serve many students with disabilities, who are also minorities. While the inclusion of minority students in the gifted and talented or advanced placement courses at my school seem to be a rarity, with one minority student at best enrolled in any given advanced placement course during an academic year. These observations, although on a very small scale, led me to question what I, as an educator could do to bring about balance, cultural awareness and racial equity within education, specifically in regards to special education.

Literature Review

Definition of Gifted Education

According to Ford, Grantham & Whiting (2008, p. 298), the term, gifted, as defined by

the United States Department of Education (1993) means:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing
at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age,
experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in
intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific
academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools.
Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all
economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor.

It is important to note that although the U.S. Department of Education has offered a working

definition for giftedness, they do not require that states have a gifted education program or

services available for those identified as gifted, which is a stark contrast to special education

programs, which are held accountable under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(IDEA). However, the definition is appropriately related to this review's topic in that it

addresses three points of interest:

- Students need to be afforded the opportunity for talent development, considering that
  some have not had access to adequate educational experiences,

- The likelihood that students reared in high socio-economic status households have had
  ample opportunities to develop their giftedness is very great, and

- Due to life circumstances, including prejudice and racial discrimination) many students
  have had to endure many more barriers which can impact their ability to readily
  demonstrate giftedness (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 298).

Current Trends in Gifted Education Programs

In the College Board's (2008) report, of all racial groups, African American "students are

the most severely underrepresented among Advanced Placement (AP) examinees—by

approximately 50%" (as cited in Whiting & Ford, 2009, p. 23). Whiting and Ford (2009), also

note the extent of underrepresentation for Hispanics and American Indian or Alaska Native, as less than 5% and greater than 40%, respectively. These results can be generalized to gifted education programs nationwide. At the secondary level, gifted education programs are in the form of AP courses; thus, this trend in the data suggests that there is not just a gap, but an abyss that exists in regards to achievement for minority students, specifically African American and Native American in contrast to their non-minority peers. Many common themes presented in the literature show that the most common obstacles to underrepresentation are teacher underreferral, lower test performance on screening assessments, and lower course grades and/or grade point averages (GPAs).

Student Identification

Two of the most criticized and most commonly used identification methods for determining whether a student is gifted are: teacher referral and standardized intelligence tests. Since gifted education programs are not federally mandated it is each school district's responsibility to devise a method for recruiting students. As stated earlier, minority students are often overlooked or underreferred by teachers, thus, contributing to the existing problem. In addition, minority students "who are referred are given tests that may not adequately assess their academic potential" (Pendarvis & Wood, 2009, p. 497). The solution is to find "more equitable identification processes for exceptional students" (Pendarvis & Wood, 2009, p. 497), thereby increasing the likelihood that more minority students will be recruited into gifted education programs. If the educational playing field is ever to be leveled, the educational community must find ways to address teacher and assessment bias, so as to correctly identify minority students. Moreover, school professionals need take into account the definition of gifted set forth by the

U.S. Department of Education, which is the most culturally responsive to date (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 298), when determining identification criteria.

Assessment Tools

According to VanTassel-Baska, Feng and de Brux (2007, p. 9), the best practices for identifying all gifted students would include a mix of test scores, grades, interviews, performance tasks, recommendations and other identification tools. Traditionally, the primary assessment tool used to identify most students has been the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test, which has often been criticized for its biased questioning. However, the literature review suggests that in order to successfully identify minority and low-income students, more non-traditional tools should be utilized, such as nonverbal intelligence tests and performance based tasks.

"Performance assessments focus on challenging open-ended problems and put an emphasis on the process the student uses to come to an answer rather than whether or not the student can quickly find the right answer" (VanTassel-Baska, et al., 2007, p. 11). The results of the VanTassel-Baska et al. study (2007) suggests that a greater number of minority and low-income students were able to be identified using such non-traditional methods than having used traditional methods. Much of the criticism regarding the use of traditional assessments, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition (WISC-III) surrounds the language contained within the test; thus, by using performance based assessments the language barrier is removed and the assessment can be more authentic.

In a study by Naglieri and Ford (2003), the effectiveness of the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT) was evaluated to find whether or not its use would help in identifying gifted African American and Hispanic students in comparison to Caucasian students. The authors contend that minority children are often not considered smart because they lack reading,

writing and mathematical skills that are typically found in gifted children; however, when given

the opportunity to perform on nonverbal tests, such as the NNAT, which does not require

students to answer verbal or quantitative questions, these students have a high performance IQ

indicating the need for a shift away from traditional assessments. Historically, the traditionally

assessments have resulted in lower scores for minority students:

> Wasserman and Becker (2000) have provided a summary of recent research on the
> WISC-III (Wechsler, 1991), Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Fourth Edition (Thorndike,
> Hagen, & Sattler), and Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability (WJ-R; Woodcock &
> Johnson, 1989) that used samples matched on key demographic variables. They found that the
> average differences in favor of Whites between standard scores for matched samples of Black
> and White groups were as follows: WISC-III = 11.0; Stanford-Binet IV = 8.1; and Woodcock-
> Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability = 11.7. These sizable mean score differences suggest that
> fewer minority children might be identified when such tests are used for determination of
> giftedness. (as cited in Naglieri & Ford, 2003, p. 156).

Hence, the argument is not that minority students should be given a separate assessment to

determine giftedness, but that tools, such as the NNAT are used instead given that the research

has found that samples, Whites and minorities, perform similarly using this type of tool. The

objective for the implementation of such an assessment would be to correctly identify the

greatest number of minority students with minimal barriers. "Giftedness includes diversity; thus,

the goals and practices of gifted education and multicultural education strive for the same

outcomes; that is, helping all students reach their full potential" (Pierce, Adams, Neumeister,

Cassady, Dixon & Cross, 2007, p. 113).

Teacher Perceptions of Minority Students

Since teacher referral is one of the primary tools for identification, it is essential that teacher

perceptions about minority students are explored, especially considering its significant impact

upon student achievement. Ford et al. (2008, p. 292) contribute the underrepresentation of

minorities in gifted education programs to deficit thinking—negative, stereotypical, and

prejudicial beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups that result in discriminatory policies and behaviors or actions. There are three distinct effects of deficit thinking:

- Heavy reliance on tests with little consideration of biases,
- Low referral rates of CLD students for gifted education services, and
- Adoption of policies and procedures that have a disparate impact on CLD students (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 293)

If the fate of minority students lies in the hands of "the gatekeepers for selective programs" (Peterson & Margolin, 1997, p. 83), then the odds of those students being referred for gifted education programs are not at all their favor.

Peterson and Margolin (1997) performed a study in which it was found that teachers often gauge a students' giftedness based on the ideals and morals of the dominant culture and when given the opportunity to refer students for gifted education services, minority groups were simply passed over. "Teachers selected members of their own culture, not because they consciously felt their culture was superior, but because they did not see naming gifted children as a choice among cultures" (Peterson & Margolin, 1997, p. 94). The findings give support to the idea that deficit thinking does indeed exist within educational settings; yet, many teachers seem oblivious to the notion that their recommendations are culturally determined.

Teacher bias can have a tremendously negative effect on minority students' educational experiences. Research shows that these biases are evident beginning as early as the primary level. Moon and Brighton (2008) found that primary-grade teachers hold a general belief of what skills a gifted learner should possess; consequently these characteristics are typically found in children who have had rich preschool experiences. The participants in the study "seemed

unable to consider as gifted, students who deviate from textbook indicators of giftedness" (Moon & Brighton, 2008, p. 473). Studies such as these demonstrate a critical need on the part of school administrators to provide continual professional development on cultural diversity in education.

Retaining Minorities in Gifted Education Programs

It is not sufficient to simply identify and recruit minorities into gifted education programs, efforts must be taken to ensure that students remain in the program. Much of the focus of the literature is on the best practices for identifying minority students; however, researchers have found that recruitment and retention are not exclusive of one another—they are intertwined and essential for increasing the number of minorities utilizing gifted services. Ford et al. (2008) reported three areas of retention issues that warrant discussion:

- Social-emotional needs of minority students in regards to their relationships with peers and teachers,

- Concerns of minorities parents about their child's happiness or sense of belonging, and

- Minority students performing at acceptable achievement levels.

All of these issues are valid reasons why minority students may not succeed in gifted education programs. It is also important to note that it is within this study that Ford et al., make the point that the deficit thinking that permeates our society and in turn impacts education and educational practices, is largely responsible for minority students not remaining in the programs.

Recommendations/Conclusion

The body of research on the underrepresentation of minorities in gifted education programs presents many common themes, as well as several recommendations for educators and other school professionals on how to become culturally responsive in the midst of our ever-increasing multicultural society. First, we must be open to alternative assessment methods, such

as the nonverbal ability measures and performance-based assessments. Secondly, "it is important for educators and parents to become knowledgeable about the various mandates and services available to students based on their needs and exceptionalities" (Anguiano, 2003, p. 33). Thirdly, professional development for educators in "gifted education, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity and economic diversity" (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 299) should be on-going and a top priority within all the nation's school districts. And lastly, a diverse student body should be welcomed and not feared, in order to develop a strong sense of community.

Ford (2005) discusses the creation of culturally responsive classrooms. She suggests that the achievement gap that exists between minorities and White students can be narrowed, if not closed if existing learning environments were changed. Ford poses the idea that there are seven aspects that contribute to a culturally responsive classroom:

1. Diversity is recognized and honored

2. Cultural mismatches are minimal

3. Teachers take time to know each student as unique individuals

4. Assessments are fair and equitable

5. Materials are culturally relevant and meaningful, taking into account each student's prior knowledge and background

6. Lessons plans are multicultural

7. Teachers demonstrate cultural sensitivity and competence

Although the list of recommendations is fairly short in length, implementing them can be a huge task because to do so would mean changing the existing educational environment and business as usual will no longer be an acceptable practice. In fact, it requires a shift in paradigm for all educational professionals and the society at large. Many of the beliefs and ideals

presented in the literature are deeply rooted in the history of the United States in regards to the treatment and acceptance of minorities, so they cannot and will not be changed instantaneously. We are by no means where we should be in regards to minority representation in gifted and talented programs; however, every advance towards progress brings us that much closer to ensuring that each student is afforded an opportunity to reach his or her greatest potential.

Application

In light of the research findings in regards to minority underrepresentation in gifted and talented education programs, I believe the most appropriate application would be a professional development tool targeting educators and school administrators. I propose the development of a wiki. A wiki is a website that is designed with the sole purpose of collaboration amongst individuals on a common topic. In this particular case it would serve to facilitate understanding, effective instructional strategies, and best practices in identifying and retaining students of color in gifted and talented educational programs. With this application, educators would be required to participate in discussion posts, upload and read peer-reviewed journal articles, and put into practice the ideas for creating culturally responsive classrooms which would be noted during classroom observations by school administrators.

Due to the collaborative nature of wikis it is the ideal choice for an education professional development. As educators it is imperative that we form learning communities where we can communicate with one another, in order to ensure that each student that enters a classroom is given an equal opportunity to reach his or her greatest potential. Hence, the wiki will provide an open forum for educators to learn with and from one another with the ultimate goal of increasing the referral rates of minorities to gifted and talented programs and retaining said students once they have been accepted into the programs. Ideally, the following proposal

would be presented to the school division and then incorporated as part of required professional development credit for all educators and school administrators.
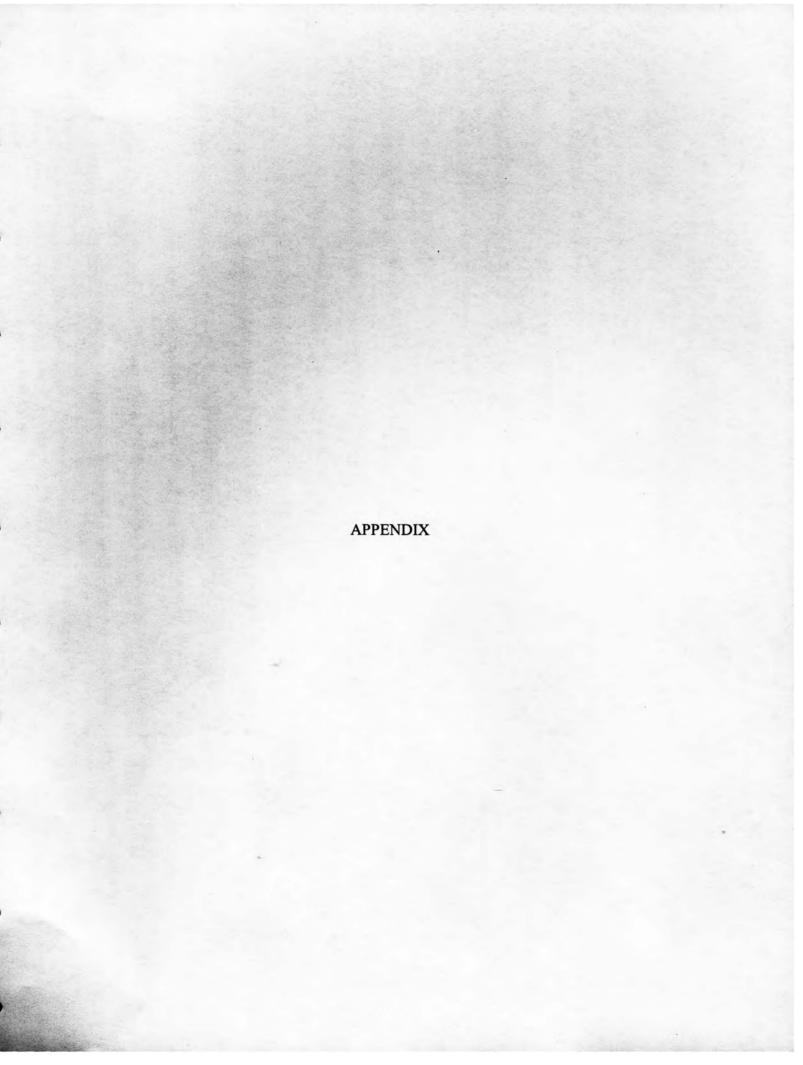
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APPENDIX

Increasing the representation of minority students in Gifted and Talented Education Programs: A Proposal for Professional Development

EDSE 589, Spring 2010

I pledge...Shana K. Curtis

Current Trends in Research

- Identification and retention are not exclusive of one another, both are necessary to combat the problem.
- Teacher perceptions of minority students
- Alternative assessment tools (e.g. NNAT)
- Diversity should be welcomed and encouraged by "creating culturally responsive classrooms" (Ford, 2005)

What does a "culturally responsive classroom" look like?

- Diversity is recognized and honored
- Cultural mismatches are minimal
- Teachers take time to know each student as unique individuals

- Assessments are fair and equitable
- Materials are culturally relevant and meaningful, taking into account each student's prior knowledge and background
- Lessons plans are multicultural
- Teachers demonstrate cultural sensitivity and competence

What the researchers say....

- YouTube - Closing the Achievement Gap: Donna Ford
- YouTube - Office Chat: Culturally Responsive Teaching

The Proposal

- Teachers and school administrators will participate in a wiki on the central topic of Identifying and Retaining Students of Color in Gifted and Talented Education programs.

- Participation will be mandatory and part of the school division professional development curriculum.

Target Participants

- K -12 Educators (General and Special)
- School Administrators
- School Psychologists
- Guidance Counselors

The Wiki

- <u>Welcome to Wikispaces - Free Wikis for Everyone</u>
  - Closing the Gap Wiki

Wiki Guidelines

- Participants would need to login and contribute to the wiki at minimum 1x/week for the duration of the 6-week course.

- Administrators will be instructed to look for use of new strategies during classroom observations and document how the educator incorporated the activity.

- Participants can add or delete information from the wiki; however, only erroneous information should be deleted.

- The wiki will be maintained by the group's organizer who will monitor page content closely.

- Participants will need to reply to discussion threads at least 1x/week while enrolled in the course.

Implications

- An significant increase in minority representation in gifted and talented education programs due to increased teacher sensitivity and appreciation of diversity in the classroom
- Development of alternative assessments
- On-going professional development
- Diversity is welcomed
- All invested stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers, administrators) can work effectively to ensure that each student, regardless of color, reaches his or her full potential.

Final Thoughts

- Program is cost-effective
- Encouraging collaboration among educators within the school system and beyond will benefit the 21st century learning environment
- This program makes our school division part of the solution and not the problem

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