

Identifying and Serving Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Gifted Students

Introduction

Inequity is pervasive throughout gifted education in America. It exists across demographics such as race, socioeconomic status (SES), locale, gender, culture, and language proficiency (Peters, 2022). The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) believes that these inequities should not exist and that a student's background should not dictate their likelihood of having their academic potential recognized and actively cultivated. NAGC believes this so deeply that it is highlighted in its mission statement, which reads, "NAGC empowers all who support children with advanced abilities in accessing equitable opportunities that develop their gifts and talents." Consistent with this belief statement and NAGC's leadership role in gifted education in the United States, NAGC recommends that all gifted programs and services implement and maintain best practices aimed at recognizing and intentionally developing the advanced academic potential of students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse.

Research Overview

The student population that makes up the American school system has never been more diverse. However, students with culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds remain underrepresented in gifted programs and services across the country. This underrepresentation has been pervasive for at least the last 50 years and has been a major impediment to students from these backgrounds living up to their full academic potential (Peters, 2022). Reasons for this underrepresentation are centered around major societal issues such as racism, poverty, and cultural barriers (e.g., language, cultural norms), as well as some practices associated with gifted education (e.g., inappropriate use of assessments, teacher bias, misalignment of identification and services) that limit the academic access and opportunities of students from these backgrounds.

Several research-based best practices have been identified that improve the educational outlook for students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse within gifted education. However, it is imperative to note that while these best practice strategies have been found to create more equitable outcomes for these students within gifted programs and services, they do not address the foundational issues of racism, classism, and sexism (Peters, 2022). Given that these foundational issues underlie equity in general, it is likely to persist at all levels of education until they are appropriately addressed.

Early and Intense Exposure to Advanced Academic Content and Experiences

Research shows that many students with advanced academic potential can be missed because of the timeline typically used for identifying gifted students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). Providing these students with academic and/or language enrichment as early in their lives as possible increases the likelihood that their advanced learning potential will be evident when they are screened or assessed for advanced academic programs and services (which typically occurs around second grade; Peters, 2022; Worrell & Dixon, 2018). Early and intense exposure to advanced academic content and experiences has been found in several studies to increase equity within gifted education (e.g., Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2017; Wells, 2020).

Universal Screening/Consideration

Universal screening/consideration means that every student within a student population (e.g., second grade) is assessed for either a referral for a comprehensive gifted evaluation (i.e., universal screening) or entry into a gifted program (i.e., universal consideration; Peters et al., 2024). Universal screening and consideration are important for two reasons. First, students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse are often underrepresented in gifted programs and services because they are not provided the opportunity to demonstrate their advanced academic potential in front of a gifted program gatekeeper. These two strategies ensure that all students get that opportunity (Card & Giuliano, 2015). Second, both strategies reduce the role of teachers within the gifted identification process, which likely results in less teacher bias impacting students' odds of being identified (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Peters, 2022). Several studies have found that universal screening and consideration results in meaningfully higher numbers of students from culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds being identified and served within gifted programs (e.g., Card & Giuliano, 2015; Hyman, 2017; Long et al., 2023).

Local Norms

Most standardized assessments compare an examinee's performance to a national set of norms (Peters et al., 2019). However, most schools and school districts are primarily concerned with the students under their charge and leveraging local and/or building norms acknowledges this reality. Local norms compare student performance on gifted identification measures to other local students (i.e., with the district, school, or grade level). This practice helps schools identify those students within their school, district, or grade level who are most likely to need and benefit from advanced curriculum and instruction (Dixon et al., 2020; Peters, 2022). Several studies have found that local norms increase equity in gifted programs

and services (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2018; Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018; Peters et al., 2019; Plucker & Peters, 2018; Warne & Larsen, 2022).

Equitable Identification Practices

Equitable identification practices include the use of multiple indicators of talent that can provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate advanced academic potential (Makel et al., 2024). Typically, gifted programs require students to score highly on all assessments. An alternative approach consists of using several measures of achievement and/or cognitive ability with documented evidence of being psychometrically valid and reliable, and admitting students who score above a predetermined threshold on one of them into the gifted program—the so called “or” rule (Lakin, 2018). Several studies have found that leveraging the *or* rule results in identifying more students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse, particularly those with potential in specific areas (e.g., math) that can then be served with appropriate programs and services in their particular talent areas (e.g., Lakin, 2018; Makel et al., 2024; McBee et al., 2014).

Relatedly, using both qualitative and quantitative data is essential for equitably identifying gifted students. This strategy consists of combining different types of relevant data and assessments to create a comprehensive picture of a student’s academic potential while minimizing potential barriers. One key component of this approach is the use of nonverbal ability tests. These instruments use shapes and figures to assess reasoning skills, which reduces the influence of English language proficiency and specific cultural and academic knowledge that can be a barrier in traditional tests (e.g., students with few formal academic learning experiences; Naglieri & Ford, 2003). The other key component is incorporating data from other educational tools. This includes academic achievement tests, academic placement tests, teacher and parent rating scales, classroom observations, and student portfolios (Davis & Douglas, 2024). By leveraging relevant data from both qualitative and quantitative measures, schools can more effectively and equitably identify advanced potential for entry into their gifted programs.

Another equitable identification practice is providing multiple opportunities over time for students to qualify for gifted programs and services. As stated above, many students have potential for high levels of achievement that may not be evident on assessments or school achievement until they have had more intense exposure to academic subjects via formal schooling. This can affect their ability to demonstrate advanced academic potential if schools only assess for gifted services in the early grades (e.g., second or third grade; Dixon, 2020; Worrell & Dixon, 2018). Having additional opportunities for these students to qualify for gifted services beyond this initial evaluation will allow students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse to gain more academic and/or language exposure prior to encountering an on-ramp for gifted services, as well as an avenue for late bloomers to qualify for gifted services.

Assessment Measures with Evidence of Being Reliable and Valid within the Population Being Evaluated

It is important to choose assessment measures for evaluation or identification that have evidence of being reliable and valid within diverse populations of students. Relatedly, for reliability and validity purposes, it is best practice to assess a student

in their primary language. These considerations are important to ensure that all students are evaluated for gifted education under similar conditions; as well, these considerations are imperative for accurate assessment (e.g., American Educational Research Association et al., 2014; Furr, 2021).

Programs and Services that are More Culturally and Linguistically Relevant

Best practice for supporting gifted students consists of an array of programs and services that serve students at varying levels of talent development (see NAGC, 2019, for review). There are four primary ways that gifted programs and services can become more relevant to students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse. More staff and teachers from diverse backgrounds can be hired to work with students, more students from diverse backgrounds can be recruited, curriculum can be revised to reflect a wide array of cultures and languages, and teachers and staff can be trained to be more culturally competent, reduce their bias, and increase their skills and capacity to work with students who may speak a different language (Worrell & Dixon, 2018). All of these initiatives would likely cultivate a more inclusive environment where students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse can feel a higher sense of connection and belonging (Worrell & Dixon, 2018).

Relatedly, there are two teaching practices that are likely to increase equity within gifted programs and services. Teachers can intentionally connect academic instruction to students’ lived experiences (e.g., using students’ prior knowledge and personal experiences to make lessons more engaging, relevant, and significant; Gay, 2010; Goings & Ford, 2018; Jackson, 2011) as well as maintain high academic expectations of all students (Brulles et al., 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Leveraging these inclusive instructional strategies is seen as a key method for better identifying and supporting gifted students from all backgrounds (Wilkins-McCorey, 2021).

Assessment for Advanced Academic Potential Across Multiple Domains and Service Gifted Students Within the Domain of Their Advanced Abilities

Gifted abilities are domain specific (Dixon et al., 2020). This means that a student who demonstrates advanced mathematics skills may or may not also demonstrate advanced skills in language arts. As a result, best practice indicates that gifted students should be assessed for advanced academic potential across multiple domains and then served within the specific domains in which they demonstrate advanced potential (Dixon et al., 2020). This strategy, similar to the *or* rule mentioned above, is likely to provide more students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse with additional opportunities to demonstrate advanced academic potential as well as likely expand the total number of students who are able to be served within gifted programs and services (Dixon et al., 2020).

Evaluation of Programs and Services

All gifted programs and services should be guided by program purposes and goals that include identifying and fostering the growth of students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse. In addition, all gifted programs and services should be regularly evaluated to determine if their student-related goals for identification and growth are being achieved (Dixon et al., 2020). Annual evaluations of programs

and services can help reduce inequity by highlighting overlooked sources of bias within identification practices, objectively assessing progress toward learning goals, and providing an objective understanding of the current state of the program and its services, including underscoring strengths to expand and revisions to undertake (Roberson, 2023). Several scholars have found that program evaluations can be an important aspect of promoting equity in gifted programs and services (e.g., Peters et al., 2023; Roberson, 2023).

Ongoing Professional Learning

A lack of specialized training can make it difficult for educators to identify students equitably for gifted programs and services (Ford, 2013; Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). Students who are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse are most affected by this gap in professional learning (Gilson et al., 2024). To ensure more equitable identification practices, ongoing professional development and support for all administrators, teachers, and staff is crucial (Frazier-Goatley et al., 2022). The need for such training is underscored by data indicating that 80% of U.S. public school educators are White and middle-class (Loewus, 2017). Without adequate training

on how to identify giftedness across different populations, an educator's identification decisions may be guided by their own familiar cultural framework (Hamilton et al., 2018). Conversely, when educators receive professional learning on inclusive teaching methods that focus on nurturing potential in all students, they gain a greater ability to recognize and build on the unique educational strengths and life experiences of each student (Horn et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Inequity is pervasive throughout gifted education in America. The primary populations affected by this are culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse students. Although it is imperative that America bands together to combat the major social issues such as racism and poverty, which contribute to inequity outcomes in gifted education, it is also incumbent upon gifted programs to act now. As a result, as the leading gifted education organization in America, NAGC recommends that all gifted programs implement and maintain best practice strategies aimed at recognizing and intentionally developing the advanced academic potential of culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse youth.

Resources

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