Teacher Referrals to the Gifted Program for Underrepresented Groups

Mackenzie D. McNickle
University of Georgia

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Dr. Tarek Grantham
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University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

Abstract Culturally and linguistically different (CLD) students are under-referred for gifted testing, and are underrepresented in the gifted population. Many districts rely on teacher referrals to the gifted program, so students are only tested if they are recommended by an adult. Teachers, who are mostly White women, may carry unconscious biases or engage in stereotypical thinking which may lead them to exclude CLD students from consideration for nomination to the gifted program. Researchers have developed some practices and strategies that teachers can adopt that may help increase the number of CLD students referred to gifted testing.

Keywords: gifted education, culturally and ethnically different students, minorities, African Americans, Hispanics, identification, teacher referral

Introduction

The United States school population is becoming more diverse, but the gifted population does not reflect that diversity. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, especially African Americans and Hispanics, are underrepresented in the gifted population. In most districts, teacher referrals are a component of the gifted identification process. It is essential that teachers are trained in identifying students outside the dominant cultural group as gifted.

Diversity and Underrepresentation

Callahan, Moon, and Oh (2013) found that 31.8% of districts reported having a gifted program comprised of more than 90% White students. Conversely, only 1.3% of districts reported having a gifted program comprised of more than 90% Black students, and 1.9% reported having programs comprised of more than 90% Hispanic students. 83% of districts reported having gifted programs comprised of 10% or less Black students, while 85.6% of districts reported the same percentage of Hispanic students. On the other hand, only 13.4% of districts reported having programs comprised of 10% or less White students.

Evidence supports that gifted students exist in minority cultural groups, or low socioeconomic status groups. Louis et al. (1999) found that with increased screening measures, more minority preschoolers living in inner-city Newark were identified as gifted. The percentage of rising first graders in Newark identified as gifted before the intervention was 0.4 percent; the researchers identified 5 percent of the sample group as being gifted. This suggests severe underrepresentation of the gifted in Newark.

Card and Giuliano (2015) found that implementing universal screening increased the number of minority students identified as gifted. In a Florida school district, all second graders were screened for gifted testing; previously, the district had relied on teacher and parent recommendations to determine who would receive IQ testing. As a result of the policy, many more students from underrepresented groups were identified as gifted, many of whom showed IQ scores well above the cutoff.

Further analysis revealed that these newly-identified students had similar academic achievement outcomes to students identified through the traditional means (teacher and parent referrals). After budget cuts, the district was no longer able to administer as many IQ tests. Subsequently, the number of gifted students identified in the district decreased to pre-policy

levels. These results indicate that implementing a universal screening policy can help to overcome the issues of teacher bias in the referral process, and permit more students to be identified, especially those in underrepresented groups.

The Teacher as Gatekeeper

Teachers are frequently the "gatekeepers" to gifted program placement, because students are referred for gifted testing on the basis of teacher recommendations. Although students generally have to attain a certain cutoff score on an intelligence quotient measure, they are not tested until referred, usually by a classroom teacher.

In a survey of elementary gifted programs, Callahan, Moon, and Oh (2013) found that 86.5% of districts used teacher nomination, while 80.5% of districts used parent nomination. In particular, 88.6% of urban schools used teacher nomination, while 84.4% of suburban schools did. Likewise, 88.6% of urban schools used parent nomination, while 78.7% of suburban schools did. Less common measures included grades, display of work, self-nomination, portfolio, peer nomination, products, and student interview.

Siegle (2001) identified several issues with teacher nominations, including overreliance on gender stereotypes, the notion that "unexpected interests" in students is a characteristic of giftedness, a focus on students' weaknesses, a reluctance to nominate student for fear of misidentifying a non-gifted student, an overemphasis on academic achievement in considering nominations to the gifted program, an ignorance of the differences in manifestations of giftedness across cultures, and the presence of classroom environments that do not lend themselves to the demonstration of giftedness.

As of the 2011-2012 school year, 76.3% of the teacher population were women, and 81.3% were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). They are adept at identifying White middle-class students as gifted, but are worse at identifying CLD or economically disadvantaged students as gifted (Moon and Brighton, 2008). McBee (2006) observed that White and Asian students are more likely to be referred to the gifted program than Black or Hispanic students, and that students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch were less likely to be nominated than students paying full price for lunch. Elhoweris (2008) found that teachers were more likely to recommend a higher-SES student to the gifted program than a lower-SES student, based on reading vignettes of students.

Abell and Lennex (1999) found that after an intervention in which teachers were trained on how to identify gifted students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, teachers reported higher self-efficacy in identifying low-SES gifted students. Most teachers reported that the intervention influenced their attitudes toward the identification of CLD and low-SES students.

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking occurs when a minority group's characteristics are framed in terms of its faults or perceived inferiority to the dominant group. Teachers who employ deficit thinking may overlook gifted characteristics in students who is culturally different from the teacher. Moon and Brighton's (2008) research examined teachers' responses to four vignettes of gifted students. Teachers readily identified the student from the dominant group who displayed classic gifted characteristics. The other three students demonstrated social and emotional issues, English language learner status, and low socioeconomic status, respectively. The teachers were much more likely to recommend these students for academic and behavior interventions, and were not

likely to refer them to the gifted program, although all three displayed gifted characteristics. Moon and Brighton observed that "Survey responses seem to suggest that students must first overcome their deficit before being considered for gifted program benefits." (2008)

In a comparison of Ford's Characteristics of Black Students, Hurston's Characteristics of Negros, and Boykin's Afrocentric Cultural Styles to ADHD characteristics, Trotman Scott and Moss-Bouldin (2014) found that many cultural practices of African Americans closely matched accepted definitions of ADHD. For instance, African American students may prefer "kinesthetic learning styles," and may perform poorly and appear off-task or hyperactive if those learning styles are not implemented by the teacher. African Americans' enjoyment of "elaborate and exaggerated language, storytelling, and telling jokes" may be seen as disrespectful and disruptive by a teacher who does not provide an appropriate outlet for that type of expression.

Practical Suggestions for Teachers

1. Examine the list of gifted characteristics for unexpected criteria, especially those that involve creative thinking and production, humor, and leadership. These characteristics may appear less academic in nature, and may be overlooked (Moon and Brighton, 2008).
2. Remember that gifted children can have social and emotional issues, behavior problems, and learning disabilities (King, 2005).
3. Talk with colleagues about students that are being considered for the gifted program, or ask a third party (guidance counselor, gifted specialist, etc.) to observe the student in

class. Teachers often have a tendency to focus on students' faults; an outsider can help to look for gifted characteristics (Moon and Brighton, 2008).

4. Attend or plan professional development that urges teachers to examine their stereotypical beliefs and unconscious biases (Ford, 2012), and to avoid thinking of culturally and linguistically different students as having deficits that need to be fixed (Ford, Grantham, and Whiting, 2011).
5. Seek professional development opportunities in understanding the characteristics and needs of gifted students, including academic, social, and emotional issues (Ford, Grantham, and Whiting, 2011).

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