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# Improving the Selection Process for Identifying Gifted Ethnic Minority Children

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*Poor and ethnic minority students are underrepresented in programs for the talented and gifted. As the number of public school students from ethnically diverse and low income backgrounds steadily increases, schools need to revise assessment tools that cannot effectively evaluate the academic potential of these populations. The authors examine the definition of giftedness, outline the limitations of current testing methods, and explore the role played by teachers' perceptions of ethnic minority children. The authors explore as well the range of social pressures on gifted African American students which may lead them to adopt behaviors that camouflage their giftedness. Dillard and Brazil present a case study in which training improved a Caucasian teacher's responsiveness to the gifted traits in one African American student. Practical suggestions to improve access to gifted education programs include new criteria of giftedness, the use of multiple selection criteria, strategies for training teachers to recognize gifted minorities, and strategies for improving parents' observations of behavioral characteristics of gifted minority children.*

Identifying students with gifted potential is often no simple task for public school teachers and administrators. The selection process becomes even more complex when ethnic minority students are considered. Whereas many Caucasian students are admitted to special programs, such as gifted education, many poor and ethnic minorities are less fortunate (Damiani). These latter students are more often forced to remain in traditional education settings, where their full potential is less developed, or not achieved (Worrel, Szarko, and Gabelko). For example,

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Worrel et al. (2001) argues that poor ethnic minority students are disproportionately excluded from programs for the talented and gifted. That is, the number of students representing the identified gifted in the United States is less likely to include a significant proportion of ethnic minorities.

Similarly, Scott, Deuel, Jean-Francois, and Urbano contend that children from culturally different and/or low-income backgrounds constitute an increasing proportion of all school children. However, assessment tools that effectively evaluate their academic potential are lacking. Consequently, children from culturally different and/or low-income families are less likely to be identified as gifted. Access to gifted education is highly unequal; African American, American Indian, and Hispanic youngsters are disproportionately underserved (Frasier, Garcia, and Passow; Kornhaber). Further, several gifted and talented proponents (Harris and Ford; Passow and Frasier; Scott et al.; Bonner; Worrell et al.) maintain that ethnic minority and poor children have been and remain underrepresented in educational programs for the gifted and talented.

It appears there is need to improve current practices for identifying and selecting potentially gifted ethnic minority students for gifted education programs. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss: a) the definition of giftedness, b) limitations of testing methods, c) teachers' perceptions, and d) social pressures on students. Also, a discussion of practical suggestions is presented regarding identifying and selecting African American students as potential candidates for gifted programs.

## Defining Giftedness

Most educational programs typically define gifted children as those who express the following characteristics: "intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, capacity and specific academic achievement" (Brown 159). According to Gallagher and Gallagher there is little agreement about how giftedness should be defined. Resenick and Goodman indicated that as to 'giftedness' itself, there is no tight definition, no single agreed-on meaning. It is a flexible construct which is part of the debate over culture and policy" (109). Passow and Frasier argue that:

*The components of traditional models and paradigms for identifying talent potential have come under criticism for a variety of reasons including: the giftedness construct is too narrow and limited; alternative approaches to or modifications of the identification processes focus on 'fitting' populations into a narrow giftedness construct; and the impact of culture and environment is not taken into account (105).*

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Federal law defines gifted and talented children as those who demonstrate “high performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity or in specific academic fields and require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school... to develop such capabilities fully” Hallahan and Kauffman 455). The U. S. Department of Education definition also states: “Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavors” (2). This statement appears broader and more inclusive of all students from various socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural groups. Measurements of students’ giftedness, using this concept, would indeed ensure greater equity among all students.

Yet how giftedness is defined is changing, according to Hallahan and Kauffman. For example, the common variable “intelligence” is much too complex to be assessed “by narrow focused standardized intelligence tests” (455). Thus, giftedness is present in children from all ethnic and cultural groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the U.S. Department of Education, giftedness can be exhibited among children with high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic field (2). Another problem in indentifying potentially gifted ethnic minority children is associated with assessment methods.

### **Limitations of Testing Methods**

**I**ndividual assessment instruments, such as the Stanford-Binet, do not accurately measure the full potential of ethnic minority students (Brown; Ford). Further, many of the objectives items are biased against African Americans since they are related to differences in values, inner city experience compared to suburban and other life styles, differences in ethnic and cultural experiences, and differences in language usage indigenous to group culture (Brown 1997). Although intelligence tests meet technical standards for validity and reliability, they are often misused in identifying students for gifted education (Tyler-Woods and Carri). For example, group I.Q. tests are commonly used to select students rather than screen them for additional identification procedures, even though group tests are too crude for selection purposes. Even when appropriately used, because mean I.Q. scores vary across racial and ethnic groups, the use of intelligence tests dramatically diminishes the chances that ethnic minority youngsters will be selected (Gagne, Belanger, and Motard). Frasier

*There is debate about whether or not teachers can accurately identify gifted students.*

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maintains that: “[a] traditional identification paradigm, which relies on teacher nomination and requires performance scores on test of intelligence and achievement, has been a serious barrier to the participation of more ethnic/minority children in programs for the gifted” (5). The ongoing yet outmoded focus on the intelligence measures as the evaluation instrument of giftedness is indeed a very real barrier to equity in gifted programs. Underrepresentation for low socioeconomic and ethnic minority students is widely associated with commonly used assessments of identifying students for gifted programs (US Department of Education; Callahan and McIntire; Frasier, Garcia, and Passow; Passow and Frasier; Kornhaber). According to Brown, many proponents of gifted education argue against the use of intelligence assessment. Furthermore, they advocate less dependence on intelligence testing for selecting potential gifted students. However, Bonner argues that standardize tests have their usefulness and should not be eliminated but used as an indicator rather than sole measure of students’ giftedness.

### **Teachers’ Perception of Ethnic Minority Children**

Oftentimes, African American and other ethnic minority students are omitted or passed over simply as a result of teachers’ and administrators’ attitudes towards and perceptions of these students, for example, Schafer (1998) states,

*Discrimination and classism within the race based on darkness of skin, haircut, quality of clothes and possessions, and socioeconomic factor divide students. Rural students are dismissed by the urban ‘elite’ despite their academic qualifications. Teachers often have lower expectations for their African American pupils, and inflexible, irrelevant curriculum restricts pupils (58-59).*

There is debate about whether or not teachers can accurately identify gifted students. Some investigators assert that teachers tend to select compliant students over more challenging students who may have greater potential (Adam and Callahan; Kornhaber). Further, some researchers (Frasier and Passow; Frasier, Garcia, and Passow; Kornhaber) contend that teachers refer disproportionately fewer African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic youngsters to gifted and talented education programs.

Moreover, teachers hold different expectations of majority and ethnic minority students, which may affect both instruction and grading (Grantham and Ford). Grades may also vary across groups, because students who especially value group identity, among many American

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Indian and African American students, sometimes avoid high grades for fear that this may isolate them from their peers (Mickelson; Kornhaber). These and other social encounters can have lasting effects on students' emotional state.

### **Social Pressures on Gifted African American Children**

Schafer (1998) contends that "Talented African American students suffer and endure humiliation and trauma [from peers] as they become aware that it is often dangerous to succeed. For instance, peer pressure has equated education with success and the rejection of African American culture for Caucasian values. Hence, these students might opt for academic failure to attain peer acceptance and security" (59). Many African American gifted students encounter negative experiences from peers as well as family members.

Bonner concurs, saying that gifted African American students may encounter problems with family and peers inside and outside the classroom. In an effort to attain social acceptance, these students often camouflage their giftedness to become part of the group. It is not uncommon for these students, while exhibiting their abilities around others, to be thought of as "acting white".

The family home environment too often expects its children to behave within a certain range of normalcy. Again, to receive acceptance, gifted children might adopt and exhibit behaviors that camouflage their giftedness such as kidding around, skipping school, and limiting achievement efforts (Bonner).

### **Concerns about Traditional Methods for Identifying Gifted Children**

According to Kornhaber, most states require schools and districts to have gifted identification screening. Traditional criteria for screening include intelligence (or I.Q.) test results and teacher endorsements (Brown). Many educators and parents contend that traditional and current methods employed for identifying and selecting gifted students exclude many ethnic minority students who are likely candidates for gifted programs. Instead, these criteria tend to favor majority students over students from low-income families and most ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans. For example, Passow and Frasier maintain that the traditional method of identifying students that depends on teacher nominations and required scores on I.Q. tests

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and achievement measures functioned mostly as major barriers to ethnic minorities' entry to gifted programs.

We have explored several of the problem areas which often limit many African American students' participation in gifted education programs. What kinds of strategies can improve the procedures for identifying potentially gifted students?

### **Strategies for Improving the Selection Process of Gifted Ethnic Minority Students**

Several problems are inherent in the process of identifying and selecting ethnic minority students for gifted programs. It is clear that teachers' perceptions of students are often culturally based (Ford and Grantham) which can lessen potentially gifted, ethnic minority students' chances of being selected. Addressing these practices may indeed require teacher training to ensure greater accuracy in identifying and selecting gifted ethnic minority students (Rhodes). This section will discuss three general areas pertaining to training teachers: 1) assessing African Americans' learning styles, 2) identifying African Americans according to the new criteria for identifying gifted students, and 3) involving parents in the identification of giftedness.

### **Helping Classroom Teachers Make Accurate Student Assessments**

The initial step in identifying gifted students begins with teacher nominations. Both Bonner and Rhodes argue that most teachers fail to receive professional training, in college or elsewhere, for recognizing potential gifted behaviors among ethnic minority youngsters. Consequently, teacher training is needed to raise awareness of various cultural dimensions and how they impact each student differentially.

Obvious attributes of gifted behavior exhibited by ethnic minorities often elude teachers because their backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles are vastly different (Bell; Ford). Many teachers, unaware of this teacher-learner dissonance, regard those students who fail to adapt to the school environment as unresponsive, disruptive, and apathetic toward learning (Graybill). Consequently, low expectations ensue and malleable skills and talents are not recognized. Certain behaviors are exhibited in such rudimentary form they go unnoticed because of, for example, poor expressive language skills. As an example, children may be extremely knowledgeable about a particular area to which they have been exposed and can articulate their knowledge of the topic in their unique

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communication style extremely well during unstructured or free time with friends. This skill is not valued in school. Due to a lag in verbal development, children fail or refuse to participate in activities because they cannot recall or articulate the daily history assignment as eloquently as some of their peers. A culturally responsive teacher would realize the discrepancy in performance and focus on students' abilities to converse effectively with peers. Cultural insensitivity to gifted behavior can be offset or eliminated through culturally based training.

Culturally focused training for teachers should highlight the strengths and enriching opportunities ethnic minorities bring to the learning environment (Graybill). Ethnic minority students seem to prefer field dependent and sensitive learning approaches which include cooperative learning and hands-on activities as opposed to the field independent, experimental analytical learning style (Bell; Graybill; Griggs and Dunn). Mexican Americans, according to Griggs and Dunn, work best in highly structured environments. African Americans, on the other hand, are more effective in socially oriented, less structured surroundings. They react positively to tasks and assignments that are personally relevant and can be processed holistically (Ford). Teachers must provide flexible learning opportunities such as cooperative groups, demonstrations, open-ended tasks and hands-on activities (Renzulli and Purcell).

Inconsistent performance among learning variables may be another signal of giftedness. For instance, students who score poorly on exams and who approach daily tasks inconsistently, yet score in the upper range on standardized tests. Students with higher order processing skills and superior conceptual ability may become behavior problems because often they are not challenged (Nicholas et al). Culturally responsive teachers recognize discrepancies in academic and test performance, develop intervention strategies and ultimately recommend qualified students for gifted education.

*Cultural insensitivity to gifted behavior can be offset or eliminated through culturally based training.*

Teacher training programs can increase awareness of methods to ascertain an accurate account of a student's performance. In addition to culturally focused workshops, seminars, university courses, and ongoing professional development, teacher interviews with students are valuable in soliciting additional information about a particular project, performance, or an exceptional characteristic. Autobiographical questionnaires (Kirschenbaum) focus on intentions, hobbies, preferences and past experiences that may prove relevant in forming accurate teacher perceptions. Teachers can further probe an assignment or project or



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create a situation to showcase artistic abilities during a school assembly or a community function. Interested persons can provide feedback and the results can be analyzed for consensus. An expert in the area of the noted attribute could be asked to observe and visit with the student and compare and share opinions. If the teacher and the professional agree, referral to the gifted program should follow. Ethnography, another data gathering technique, requires school personnel to get information about presumed characteristic of superiority from a person in the community in which the child resides (Castellano). Collaboration with other professionals and community acquaintances serves to validate and strengthen a teacher's input into the identification process.

### **New Criteria of Giftedness: Training Teachers To Recognize Gifted Ethnic Minorities**

**T**he new paradigm shift in gifted education calls for a new and dramatically different approach to identifying giftedness (Passow and Frasier). The focus is on a technique that encompasses a wider spectrum of behaviors, including potential gifted traits. It also recognizes psychological, cultural, environmental, and social influences on behaviors, and employs multiple selection criteria and procedures that would ensure greater ethnic minority representation in programs for the gifted (Ford; Frasier, 1997; Passow and Frasier; Renzulli and Purcell). It is imperative that teachers are aware of the new criteria for identifying and selecting students who qualify for gifted education. Entry into a gifted program is not based solely on superior performance on an I.Q. or achievement test (Passow and Frasier; Renzulli and Purcell). A combination of factors such as high grade point average, strong scores on teacher rating forms, and exceptional characteristics may be taken into consideration.

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Forsbach and Pierce found that teachers increased their ability to identify attributes of gifted behavior through staff development and the use of multiple criteria.

Subsequently, the number of African Americans referred to the gifted program increased. Pre-service training has been shown to heighten awareness of the complexities surrounding academic needs of students from diverse backgrounds, to highlight the necessity for

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appropriate curricula and to promote a change of attitudes toward these students (Moon, Callahan and Tomlinson).

Authentic assessment such as rating of portfolios (Schwartz) can be used to validate students' gifted potential. Other methods that teachers have used to identify talent among ethnic minorities are biographical self-identification inventories (Schwartz) and tryouts in programs of interest (Fishkin and Johnson).

## **Psychological and Social Pressures of Gifted Ethnic Minorities**

Cultural responsive teachers are well aware of the social and psychological pressures that confront brilliant children from ethnic minority communities (Patton and Townsend). Peer pressure, test anxiety, and wavering teacher support often have psychological implications for ethnic minority students (Ford and Harris III). Peterson, (1997) alludes to the difficult lives that mask the abilities of some children. The homeless, abuse, neglect, and unstable living arrangements can affect students psychologically. Psychological problems may cause some bright younger students to withdraw and older students to turn to violence, crime, drugs and alcohol (Dixon, Mains and Reeves). Without support and assistance from teachers these children are less likely to achieve their optimal level of development (Peterson 1997). Teachers who have low academic expectations of ethnic minority students, maintain their distance from these students, and are strictly influenced by standardized test scores (Ford and Harris) create a social environment that is not conducive to learning at higher levels. Peterson, (1999) states teachers' values, beliefs and attitudes, as well as those of others in the school environment, if less than positive, can create sociological problems for these children and may cause them to feel disconnected from school, teachers, and peers.

Teachers can help parents and peers to understand and accept ethnic minority children and their giftedness as they work with these students to nurture and develop their talents as well as address their personal needs (Peterson 1999). Mentoring (Goff and Torrance), tutoring, counseling, and peer collaboration are suggestions that can help to alleviate psychological and social obstacles students face.

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## Improving Parents' Observations of Behavioral Characteristics of Gifted Minority Children

For those parents who are unaware of their children's superior abilities, educational training programs (Levine) and partnerships (Strip and Hirsch) can assist them in recognizing and cultivating intellectual and creative potential in their children. Culturally responsive teachers form cooperative parent-teacher teams (Strip and Hirsch) and make concerted efforts to share ideas and determine what is best for the intellectually gifted child. Parent checklists or rating forms may be used, according to Dixon, Mains, and Reeves, to assess a child's potential. Inviting parents to observe in their children's class (Covarrubia 2000) as teachers points out children's strengths, how they are addressed, and offer suggestion for parents to use at home and parenting courses are strategies that will increase parents' observations of their children's gifted behavior.

### A Case Study

Ethnic minority children and adolescents may possess emerging or dormant talents that elude recognition by educators because the attributes do not fit the typical profile of persons interested in certain professions (Fishkin and Johnson). For example, Aaron, a 10-year-old African American male, is very active, gregarious and disorganized. During the time he is quiet, however infrequent, and between or during assignments, he draws an array of geometric shapes. He is performing below grade level in content subject areas, but his achievement test scores are well above average. He excels in art and can put together any do-it-yourself kit of model cars and airplanes effortlessly without reading the instructions. In art classes he abstractly sketches shapes and forms and relishes in describing them to his peers and teachers.

*A single criterion functions as a barrier to program entry*

One morning in particular, as Ms. Dabkee, a middle-aged Caucasian and Aaron's homeroom teacher, circulated around the room during an independent activity, she did not reprimand Aaron for his off-task behavior as she usually did. She had recently attended a cultural awareness workshop and for the first time noticed the unique features of his art. She observed Aaron in her class and his art class for one week. Ms. Dabkee observed and recorded Aaron's behavior and drawings in art and her class. She decided to use his art as an incentive to increase the quality and quantity of his academic work. Ms. Dabkee talked to Aaron

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and was appalled that she had not realized his potential for and interest in architecture. His parents were surprised that his drawing actually represented something other than scribbling. The parents recounted Aaron's fascination with building anything that could be glued or nailed together and they had proof of his art and other creations all over the house. They never considered it a special talent. His teacher submitted a nomination to the gifted and talented coordinator after Aaron's academics improved and his interest in art soared.

The scenario above used four procedures that are recommended for uncovering hidden talents. Ms. Dabkee's insight into Aaron's emerging talent was kindled through her participation in professional development offered by the school district. She used direct observation to establish and record a behavior pattern. Communicating with the student about his interest and the attribute in question was another strategy the teacher used to explore beyond the visible signs of the child's potential. Interacting with the parents to obtain information about their child's past experiences and accomplishments regarding the observed attribute proved beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

**I**n spite of the underrepresentation of ethnic minority students, particularly African Americans, in the talented and gifted education programs, serious efforts are warranted to change the selection process for enhancing the numbers of ethnic minorities for these programs. Professionals should consider the definition of "giftedness" as one that is broad enough to include children of all cultures and ethnic groups. Additionally, it is obvious that a single criterion to qualify students for gifted programs such as students' performance on I.Q. tests, is an insufficient measure of their abilities. A single criterion functions as a barrier to program entry. This is probably true for most students, Caucasians as well as ethnic minorities. Employing multiple criteria, including I.Q. tests results, in the selection process will provide greater assessments of ethnic minority students' talents and abilities and enhance their chances for gifted program selection.

Another significant aspect of improving the selection process is the training of teachers regarding ethnic minority students' culture, learning styles, and how to identify talented and gifted behaviors. Professional training with teachers should also include methods involving how to work with parents of gifted children. Parents can be instrumental in monitoring their children's growth and development as well as working to enhance their children's abilities.

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