Nurturing Minority Talent

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by Rosina M. Gallagher

Yes, “the times they are a-changin’”—but ever so slowly! The good news is that since the passage of the Gifted and Talented Education Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-97), researchers continue to support the conviction that youngsters with talent potential are found in all cultural groups and across all economic strata. The bad news is that public school districts continue to invest in static, predetermined gifted programs for which students must qualify, rather than establish flexible processes to better understand and serve their students and families.

Were it not for desegregation mandates, it would still be common to find white, middle-class students dominating gifted programs. This is because traditional identification practices used to evaluate student performance treat students from disadvantaged backgrounds as though they were raised in middle-class homes. The result is that our measures of giftedness reflect not talent potential but the amount of resources available to children (Slocumb & Payne 2000).

Educators examining the impact of poverty caution that it involves more than lack of money (Lewis 1996; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997; Payne 1998; Slocumb & Payne 2000). Payne describes poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (1998). For example, middle-class parents generate sufficient economic resources to satisfy basic necessities and emotional resources to help their children learn to control personal behavior, make good choices, and solve problems. Families in poverty generally lack these resources.

Other resources families in poverty may do without include spiritual beliefs, which build self-worth and sustain hope and purpose in the face of adversity; physical health and an active lifestyle; and a support system of family, friends, and community. Their children often lack nurturing role models and a knowledge of the “hidden rules” they must obey in order to flourish in middle-class social situations.

Uncover Their Talent

Given these considerations, educators tend to agree that public schools must adopt a broad concept of giftedness to uncover potential among minorities, one that draws from multiple sources of information to include creativity and leadership (Bernal 2002; Hébert 2002; Moore et al. 2005).

Achievement and standardized aptitude tests should be used, as well as portfolios of student-selected work samples that reflect strengths and growth over time; teacher and peer ratings; and parent and student interview data. Rather than rely on individual nominations, schools should conduct whole-class screenings as early in the school experience as possible. And instead of using arbitrary cutoff scores, they should look at the “preponderance of evidence” (Slocumb & Payne 2000).

Identifying gifted minority students only starts the process. To build relevant gifted programs for minority students, schools must get to know the students and families being served. One way to accomplish this is to ask families to complete a survey when they enroll. The survey could include basic family background; preferred times for workshops that support children’s academic progress or social development; and questions to identify parent expertise in crafts, storytelling, music, or technology. While these seem like ordinary community involvement activities, they are crucial to the success of a gifted program if minority students and families are to see it as something that is accessible and relevant to their lives.

Helping minority families understand gifted education requires more than simply issuing print materials with appropriate translations. Often, minority parents appreciate orientations, with their opportunity for personal relationships and guided discussion.
Create Relevancy

Relevant gifted programs reflect what is important to minority students. Rather than focus on faster pace of instruction in academic areas in order to achieve higher scores on standardized tests, teachers should use hands-on experiences and real-life situations to explain important concepts. If minority students value their languages and cultures, why not integrate these into the curriculum?

For many immigrant students, the goal of education embraces more than abstract knowledge and principles. It means learning to be caring, well-mannered individuals who respect and support one another at home and in the community. The worst criticism of a child in the Latino culture, for example, is to be mal educado—ill-bred and irresponsible. School activities, therefore, should be structured to allow meaningful relationships to flourish.

Another way to encourage relevancy in gifted programs for minority students might be to provide teachers with student surveys (Coil 2000; Heacox 2002). Surveys could examine:

- Interest in non-school subjects;
- Areas in which students have expert knowledge;
- Preferred learning styles;
- What they like best about their culture;
- Competency levels in English and their home language;
- Responsibilities at home;
- Areas they would really work at if given support and guidance;
- Things they may want to change in their neighborhood; and
- Their perceptions of being gifted.

Many minority students also need a full-time gifted program. Part-time pullout programs, such as a Junior Great Books discussion group that meets once or twice a week for a 40 minute period, are not adequate to develop vocabulary, interpretation, and communication skills—let alone appreciation for literature—for minorities. A language arts program that provides all types of reading materials—including some in students’ first languages—and encourages writing that validates their own experiences may keep minority students motivated.

When minority students are assigned long-term projects, they should be provided with models, materials, and the opportunity to work with a partner or consult with the teacher, preferably in school at flexible hours. Many pupils from low socioeconomic and large family homes cannot afford materials and cannot readily access public libraries, cultural institutions, electronic media, or have a quiet, well-lit place where they can work on a project.

Children from varied cultural groups struggle to live in two worlds, the home and the school. Each should be valued. Professional support personnel—counselors, social workers, and psychologists—can certainly enhance a gifted program by helping talented students clarify values, build social skills, develop leadership, and explore careers. Working with educators, they can structure and maintain a gifted program that uncovers and nurtures the potential of minority students that too often lies unexplored.

Signs of Talent

The following are some characteristic behaviors that may be indicative of high potential among culturally diverse children:

- Is highly curious;
- Enjoys discovering and manipulating language;
- Thinks of unusual ways to solve problems;
- Learns to speak a second language quickly;
- Is clever at making things out of ordinary or recyclable materials;
- Manifests understanding of the importance of family and culture;
- Enjoys older playmates or easily engages adults in conversation;
- Is able to influence and persuade others;
- Shows independence and self-sufficiency;
- Displays a sense of humor;
- Displays above-average physical coordination;
- Displays talent in the fine and performing arts (e.g., music, drawing, drama, and dance);
- Demonstrates good memory for stories, songs, and poetry;
- Plans and organizes events;
- Engages in abstract reasoning despite limited vocabulary;
- Adapts readily to new situations;
- Perseveres in attaining goals;
- Is sensitive to the feelings of others;
- Demonstrates social maturity at home or community; and
- Becomes absorbed in self-selected tasks or issues.

References


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**On the Same Page**

**Preparation**
*A few days prior to the faculty meeting, distribute the article, “Nurturing Minority Talent,” to faculty members with the expectation that they will have read it before coming to the meeting.*

**Icebreaker (time needed: 15 minutes)**
Ask faculty to discuss, in groups of five or six, whether they agree with the main ideas of the article:

- Traditional identification practices for gifted children assess the amount of resources available to children rather than talent, and minorities and families in poverty often lack these resources.
- In order to uncover talent among minorities, schools should conduct whole-class screenings. They should look at a “preponderance of evidence,” which uses achievement tests but also includes student work, behaviors that indicate high potential, and teacher or peer ratings.
- To build a gifted program with relevancy for minority students, schools need to build it around students’ and parents’ interests and lifestyles. Surveys could include expertise that parents would be willing to share with students, students’ responsibilities at home, and students’ interests, among others.
- When assigning projects, since minorities and families in poverty often do not have the necessary resources, schools should provide materials and a place for students to work on projects after school hours.

Discussion (time needed: 15 minutes)
Ask faculty to share their thoughts regarding the following questions:

1. How is our approach to identifying gifted and talented students similar to or different from the identification process described by the author?
2. Do conditions in our school inhibit or foster identifying gifted minority students?
3. What are the advantages of the model presented by the author over gifted and talented pull-out programs?
4. To what extent should teachers differentiate instruction for students who need additional challenges?
5. What would we need to learn to provide even more focused instruction for gifted and talented students?

Application (time needed: 15 minutes)
Ask faculty to address one or more of the following:

1. Meet with grade-level colleagues to develop a student interest inventory and a protocol to uncover potential. Share the protocol at the next faculty meeting.
2. Research instructional strategies, resources, and cultural organizations that provide support for minority students who show potential.
3. Develop a unit based on student interest that provides additional challenge for students.
4. Schedule a meeting of minority parents to build relationships and determine what is important to them regarding their children’s learning.

---created by Stephen Gould

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