

The Underrepresentation Problem in Gifted Education: Overcoming the Opportunity Gap

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Hardly a week goes by without another news item about a school district's attempt deal with the problem of the underrepresentation of low income and minority students in gifted education programs. Frequently mentioned suggestions for addressing the problem typically include the use of universal screening, local norms, non-verbal tests, and multiple criteria. While these recommendations may have value in providing a broader look at the development of gifted behaviors, they are still related to norm-based assessment metrics, they fail to take into consideration the important distinction between high achieving (or lesson-learning) giftedness as compared with creative/productive giftedness, and they fail to address two major issues underlying the field.

The first issue is how we use the word "gifted." An understanding of what the term "gifted" means raises the question of what practical or heuristic purpose the term serves once it is deprived of the aura that surrounds its use in many professional education groups and lay communities. When considering the meaning of the word, "gifted," one must first examine the parts of speech assigned to the g-word in the dictionary. It is categorized as both a noun and an adjective. When used as a noun, the word refers to an *entity* or state of being. For example, "He or she is gifted." Synonyms for the word when used as a noun are almost non-existent but "blessed" or "preordained" might come close. The traditional entity usage of the term gifted and primary reliance on ability-test scores and norms have resulted in severe under-representation of high potential students from low income and minority groups in gifted education programs. This approach also leaves out students of all backgrounds who are not the best lesson learners of traditional standards driven curriculum but may be highly creative, those who think differently and pursue tasks with different learning styles, communicate in different expression styles, and those who have highly specialized talents, interests, imaginations, or motivation. These individual differences are seldom considered in traditional gifted program identification procedures even when using universal screening and local norms.

When used as an adjective, the term refers to high potential in a particular area of human performance and usually has reference to a criterion or comparison group (e.g., "She is a gifted writer for her age or grade level."). Synonyms frequently found terms when the word "gifted" is used as an adjective are also adjectives that usually take an object (e.g., superior mathematician,

advanced reader, innovative designer), all words that provide helpful direction when considering the types of opportunities, resources, and services that might be provided for a particular student. These two different interpretations of the term “gifted” raise what might be the most important questions. Is one born gifted or are gifted behaviors developmental? And, can we develop these behaviors in larger numbers of students than those who are the highest scorers on cognitive ability or academic achievement tests?

The second issue underlying the underrepresentation problem is the difference between the two types of assessment used to identify students for special programs and services. The first type is assessment *of* learning—anything that tells us what students already know and how they have performed in school when compared with others. In this context it reflects the student’s family background, neighborhood demographics, early life experiences, and the quality of his or her previous school experience.

The second type is assessment *for* learning, and this type takes into account many characteristics of the learner that provide the best direction for special opportunities, resources, and encouragement. These co-cognitive characteristics include curiosity, interests, learning styles, expression styles, and enjoyment and high engagement learning in particular topics. Equally important are co-cognitive skills such as collaboration, cooperation, planning, self-regulation, and other executive functions skills. These characteristics are not as easily objectified as reading and math test scores but can be recognized by teacher observations, rating scales, and how students react in performance-based assessment situations. For example, Roberto, a low performing student according to his state achievement test scores, had a curious fascination with anything related to mechanics and electricity. After examining his strength-based profile his teacher encouraged him to work on a project for the state Invention Convention competition. He developed a dog bowl that sets off a flashing light when the water level drops below a given weight. Roberto won his division at the state competition and went on to compete in the national invention convention competition conducted at the Henry Ford Museum. All of the background reading, experimentation, data gathering, and presentation skills that Roberto used are the kinds of gifted behaviors that we refer to as creative/productive giftedness, which I define as the young person thinking, feeling, and doing like the practicing professional, even if at a more junior level than adult scientists, writers, or film makers. And these are exactly the kinds of skills that present-day employers are seeking in the rapidly changing job market where creativity, innovation, and task commitment are being valued more than just getting a high score on standardized tests. History is replete with men and women who were not superstars in school but who made notable contributions to their respective areas of interest and strengths when given opportunities and support.

Today’s emphasis on big data, test scores, and norms tell us a lot about decision making for groups, but it poorly serves each and any individual student because it fails to drill down on what

we need to know to make the best decisions for an individual child. Although metric based scores and national, state, and even local norms inform us about the distribution of traditionally measured academic abilities of groups, they do not zero in on individuals' co-cognitive strengths that are so important for decision making about supplementary services. These strengths don't make a person gifted or not gifted in the entity interpretation of the g-word, but they are a starting point for decision making about who should be considered for advanced learning and creative/productive opportunities in particular academic domains and topical strength areas. We can achieve greater equity in gifted education programs for underrepresented populations by replacing entity-based approaches to identification and concentrating instead on developing gifted behaviors in individual students' interests, talents, motivation, and executive function skills in singular areas where there is performance-based evidence of high potential.

Changing demographics in our schools means that educators must recognize that America's talent pool is changing. If scholars and educators are to remain true to the purpose of producing the next generation of leaders, scholars, artists, and creative innovators, then they must explore ways of going beyond traditional metrics and norms.

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