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Poor and Minority Students Can Be Gifted, Too!

Our daily practices must reflect the recognition that gifted students come from all walks of life.

Despite all efforts toward equity in schools, minority and poor students remain noticeably absent from gifted programs. The most frequent explanation for their low representation in such programs is performance on an IQ test below the cutoff score set by a state department, school district, or school system. Other explanations describe the limitations of a low socioeconomic environment to stimulate and support the development of higher intellectual capacities. Finally, there is the persistent attitude that giftedness simply cannot be found in some groups (Frasier 1987).

Improving Nomination Methods

Such negative attitudes are reinforced by narrow nomination and screening methods that limit the access of underinvolved populations to these programs. As Gallagher (1983) noted, "if you don't get a chance to come to bat, you don't get a chance to hit." To give these students their chance, we can expand the methods used to appraise children's potential.

We can create nomination forms that incorporate behavioral traits, such as the 15 indicators of giftedness delineated by Hagen (1980, pp. 23-26). The use of these dynamic (rather than static) traits requires nominators to observe, for example, a student's use of language rather than just to rely on appraisal of language in a test situation.

Second, parents and other representatives of the underinvolved groups can help educators reword items on rating scales (such as the Scale for Rating Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students, Renzulli and Hartman 1971), so

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that the ratings more accurately reveal the manifestations of giftedness within a cultural group.

Third, teachers can develop vignettes of poor and minority students they have taught to serve as prototypes of successful students. Nominators can then use these vignettes as examples to help others recognize students who are demonstrating potential for achievement. The development of vignettes is enhanced by incorporating behavioral traits of successful students from disadvantaged backgrounds. (See Ross and Glaser 1973 for a particularly useful source of such traits.)

The intent of these approaches is to broaden concepts of what giftedness looks like in minority and low socioeconomic populations. Then, as teachers and parents become aware of the varied manifestations of giftedness, they are better prepared to recognize—and nominate for programs—many more poor and minority students.

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Expanding The Definition of *Intelligence*

Another barrier to equity in gifted programs is the continuing but outmoded emphasis on the IQ as the *sine qua non* of giftedness. When program acceptance is based solely on this limited criterion, minority and poor students do not fare well. Thus, a more nearly complete definition of *intelligence* is part of the solution to eliminating barriers.

A few years ago, Torrance (1979) demonstrated that we can learn much about children's potential by examining indicators of intelligence that do not depend on prelearned solutions to problems. He developed the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, figural and verbal, to assess children's responses to open-ended problem-solving situations. Corroborating this concept, Sternberg (1982) advocated that ability be evaluated not only through the measurement of one's manipulation of *entrenched concepts* (familiar) but also one's ability to deal with *nonentrenched concepts* (unfamiliar).

Recently, Sternberg's (1981) Triarchic Theory of Intelligence and Gardner's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences became major breakthroughs in expanding the definition of *intelligence*, foretelling the end of reliance on factor-analytic, psychometric measures such as IQ. Clark's (1988) research on brain/mind functioning has further supported a broad concept of giftedness, one that includes talent other than academic.

These developments, combined with the findings of other researchers (Baldwin 1984, Renzulli 1978, Treffinger and Renzulli 1986, and Tannenbaum 1983), have led to a more sophisticated array of best practices in identifying potential for gifted performance. These practices include:

- seeking nominations from a variety of persons, professional and nonprofessional, inside and outside school;
- applying knowledge of the behavioral indicators by which children from different cultures dynamically exhibit giftedness in the development of nomination forms;
- collecting data from multiple sources, objective and subjective, including performances and products;

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- delaying decision making until *all* pertinent data can be collected in a case study (Frasier 1987).

Also noteworthy are the productive efforts of Tonemah (1987) and of the American Indian Research and Development Center in Norman, Oklahoma, in identifying gifted and talented American Indian students using creativity indicators. These and other developments are helping us to make headway, but there is more that we can do.

What Else Needs to Be Done?

As efforts continue to break down barriers to equity, we are encountering other challenges in serving poor and minority students well. We often fear that their deprived backgrounds will put them at a loss in a program that assumes familiarity with certain content and experiences. Thus, we typically *adapt* curriculum to try to fit or adjust the students to the curriculum. For example, minority and poor children are placed in pre-gifted programs designed to remediate language and performance deficiencies. Upon successful completion, they may then be certified for placement in a gifted program. What is more promising is to emphasize *accom-*

modation by changing the structure, function, or form that produces an enhanced learning environment. Examples of curriculum accommodations would be to emphasize high expectations for achievement, establish clear standards of excellence, and provide assistance in securing mentors.

Second, new information is causing us to reconsider the misconception that poor homes are necessarily illiterate or incapable of supporting intellectual development. Recent findings indicate that the qualities of home life that promote achievement are similar, regardless of income level (Bradley et al. 1987, Coleman 1969, Murphy 1986, Rosenbaum et al. 1987, Scott-Jones 1987, Slaughter and Epps 1987). For example, the entire August 1988 issue of *Ebony* magazine—in particular, the article "Model Youths: Excelling Despite the Odds" (Brown 1988)—compels us to reexamine notions and expand realities regarding the extent of support for intellectual development in the black community. As we reconceptualize the role of families in promoting intellectual achievement, we can better recognize their strengths and resources and work in partnership with them.

Third, we must strengthen counseling options to provide the social and emotional support these students need to gain confidence in their abilities (Exxum 1979, 1983; Colangelo 1985; and Frasier 1979). With adequate support, they can manage the conflict inherent in being identified gifted, gain access to the information they need to make good academic and vocational decisions, and resolve the problems of social interaction within their culture and the culture of the larger society. See Comer (1987) for an excellent program that defines the total academic, social, and psychological support needed to enhance the achievement of minority and poor students.

The Reality of Diversity

An encompassing perspective of giftedness and improved assessment methods will help us to remove the barriers that so often keep poor and minority students out of programs for the gifted. The gifted in our schools are a diverse group, made up of children from all racial groups, at all ages, and at all socioeconomic levels. □

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