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Teacher Perceptions of Giftedness

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**Abstract**

This study explored teacher perceptions towards giftedness and the implications of under-identification of minority children. It begins with a description of gifted education and the importance of the identification of gifted students. Historically and presently, minority children are under-identified for consideration in gifted and talented programs. Some characteristics of minority children are then listed as well as some culturally supported attitudes and abilities that hinder learning. The methods of assessment to qualify for gifted and talented are reviewed as well as implications of these testing measures. Inequalities in nominations and assessment are two sources of the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted and talented programs. Educators’ perceptions regarding giftedness impact what services are given to which students.

*Keywords*: *giftedness; teacher perceptions; bias; minority children*

Teacher Perceptions of Giftedness

Identification of gifted students is a challenge for many gifted programs. As stated by Pierce, Adams, Neumeister, Cassady, Dixon, and Cross, “one significant problem that continually surfaces in the identification process is the lack of minority student representation” (2007, p. 113). Ford (1998) found that over the past 30 years minority students have been consistently underrepresented in gifted programs and White and Asian Americans have been consistently overrepresented. “Educators have proposed several explanations for the underrepresentation of minority students, including overreliance on standardized tests, inequity in educational experiences, and cultural perceptions of, and attitudes toward, giftedness” (Pierce et al, 2007, p. 114). To be considered for gifted testing, students are screened by teachers or standardized tests. This policy may be an impediment for minority students since the tests may be culturally biased and teacher perception may impact who they refer for testing.

Since minority children are under-identified for consideration in gifted and talented programs, research to discover the under-identification of minority students is essential. Conceptions of giftedness impact identification of minority students as well as teacher perceptions of giftedness. Therefore, the overall question for this research is “How do teacher perceptions of giftedness determine who and who they do and do not refer for gifted testing?”

**Methods**

To gather literature for this study I searched Galileo and ERIC for full-text, peer-reviewed articles. I also called the National Association for Gifted Children to inquire about some articles that were not freely available on the internet. I talked with the coordinator for gifted education in Fayette County and two co-workers to see if this research problem existed in our county. They all encouraged me to study this question so I drilled deeper in Galileo and ERIC to find literature articles that were interesting and focused on the topic of gifted identification of minority students. When I began gathering articles, I soon realized that conceptions of giftedness impact teacher identification as well as teacher perceptions of giftedness. So, for background information I read articles that explained how conceptions of giftedness have changed over the years. Conceptions of giftedness impact teacher perceptions. If a teacher truly believes that superior intelligence is the main determination for a gifted label, then he/she may not perceive a highly creative student as gifted. Therefore, our conceptions of giftedness directly impact our perceptions of giftedness.

**Findings**

**History of Gifted Education**

Historically, giftedness has had multiple definitions. Some of the pioneers of gifted education include Lewis Terman and Leta Hollingworth. Ms. Hollingworth originally focused on superior intelligence as the determination for giftedness. “By the 1930s, Hollingworth began to acknowledge that giftedness could manifest in additional ways” (Jolly, 2005, p. 39). Not only was a superior intelligence a requirement for gifted, but she also included arts, drawing, creativity, and leadership. “Lewis Terman’s definition of giftedness was inextricably tied to that of intelligence (Jolly, 2005, p. 39). Initially Terman thought that children testing at 140 IQ should be classified as gifted, but later he changed the number to 180. (Jolly, 2005, p. 40). “Their original definitions relied largely on measures of intelligence and narrowly defined who would be identified: primarily White students from middle and upper class homes” (Jolly, 2005, p. 42). Our federal government has a definition of giftedness, but the states do not have to adopt that definition.

The current definition, which is located in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is: Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (“Is there a definition”, 2008)

**Conceptions of Giftedness**

As shown, nationwide there is no consensus for what truly constitutes giftedness. The Georgia definition for giftedness states the following:

Gifted Student - a student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities. (SBOE Rule 160-4-2-.38, p. 1)

Since there is no consensus for the definition of giftedness, conceptions of giftedness vary. Now, other traits are being recognized for gifted identification. “As the understanding of human abilities expanded, the notion of using multiple methods to examine the gifts and talents of young people was embraced” (Brown, et al, 2005, p.71).

Due to the changing definition of giftedness, teachers were included to nominate children for gifted testing. Teachers as nominators for gifted education can present a challenge when teachers do not share the same conceptions of giftedness as their state. “When asked for their personal conceptions of giftedness, nearly every teacher mentioned some aspect of divergent thinking.” (Hunsaker,1994, p. 3). Even though teachers value divergent thinking, when it comes to the nomination of students for gifted programs, teachers focus on classroom performance. “The role played by academic achievement (e.g. high grades, reading above grade level), work habits, and ease of learning was much greater when considering a student for nomination than when simply discussing personal beliefs about giftedness (Hunsaker,1994, p. 3). “In this way, whether a primary grade student receives support to develop his or her talents, and how his or her talents are developed will depend in large measure on how that student’s teacher conceptualizes giftedness in young children, including those from diverse backgrounds” (Moon & Brighton, 2008, p. 448). “Although conceptions of giftedness may seem abstract, they do, to some extent, influence school and classroom composition” (Schroth, & Hefler, 2009, p. 384). The changing definitions of giftedness impact teacher referrals.

**Perceptions of Giftedness**

Classroom teachers are the first line for recruitment and they often rely on standardized test data as a referral source. Some argue that standardized tests may be culturally biased. “School districts have an option when using a test that has a cultural bias. “They can norm for each subpopulation” (Vanderslice, 1998, p. 7). Other options include performance-based assessments, interviews, surveys, and authentic assessments. A specific performance-based assessment, DISCOVER, was investigated by Ketty Sarouphim for its effectiveness in identifying gifted minority middle school students. “In the continuous struggle to establish equity in gifted education, the use of authentic assessment seems to be promising. Instruments such as DISCOVER can greatly contribute to diversifying gifted education programs” (Sarouphim, 2004, p. 68). “The first step to addressing the under-representation of economically disadvantaged students in gifted education is to focus on recruitment” (Elhoweris, 2008, p.35). The source of referrals that teachers use may in fact be biased.

Giftedness can be found in every culture. “However it does differ from group to group. This difference results from differing values, attitudes, and opportunities” (Vanderslice, 1998, p. 7). “The potential for academic giftedness is present in equal proportions in all racial/cultural/ethnic groups in our society” (Moon, T. & Brighton, C, 2008, p. 457). Although teachers acknowledge that giftedness is present in every culture, teachers may be biased to homes that offer more educational support. “Teachers, in general, believed that the most important factors contributing to students being recognized as gifted comes from exposure to stimulating events at home or from their parents” (Moon, T. & Brighton, C, 2008, p. 457). Teachers surveyed nationwide, “seemed comfortable with the description of a gifted learner as possessing strong reasoning skills, a general storehouse of knowledge, and facility with language, including a strong vocabulary-characteristics associated with children with rich preschool experiences” (Moon, T. & Brighton, C, 2008, p. 472). The characteristics of giftedness within cultures vary due to the values held by the culture.

A case study was conducted in Arkansas to see if teacher training could impact teacher perceptions of giftedness. Prior to any training it was noted that Mrs. McKenzie, a teacher studied, “recognized other talents as indicators of giftedness (but) her description of giftedness was embedded in academic performance” (Milligan, 2001, p. 16). After training, Mrs.McKenzie changed her description of giftedness to the following:

It is a child who catches on to things rather quickly has something that stands out above all other children whether it is academics, creativity, artistic ability He or she is unlike all the other children in some aspect.

Ms. Milligan’s research demonstrates that training is essential for teachers to recognize how giftedness is portrayed in students in order to recruit all gifted students, not just those who show higher academic performance.

**Implications for Identification of Diverse Gifted and Talented Students**

The problem of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education has not been solved. “Because teachers’ ratings of students play an important role in identifying gifted students, it is important to investigate whether teachers’ beliefs, stereotypes, biases, and expectations influence their selection of students for gifted and talented programs’ (Siegle, & Powell, 2004, p. 21). “Teacher referral practices have also been cited as contributing to the problem of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs” (Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady, Dixon, 2007, p. 480). If teachers do not refer minority students for testing, these students may not have the opportunity for an education that they need. “The referral process in an obvious potential source of unfairness in the entrance process” (McBee, 2006, p. 103).

Perhaps teachers do not recognize how giftedness manifests in different cultures. “More specifically, these teachers did not appear to have a clear understanding of how giftedness may manifest in minority and/or economically disadvantaged students” (Neumeister, et al, 2007, p. 486). A study conducted in Arizona found that “Native Americans are clearly underrepresented in gifted programming” (Knutson, K, McCarthy-Tucker, S., 1993, p. 4). “If teachers are not culturally sensitive to differences in expression and learning style demonstrated by Native American students, they are no more likely to identify students equitably than a test is” (Knutson, K, McCarthy-Tucker, S., 1993, p. 4). “These potential sources of error include language differences, differences in background experiences, and differences in the affective dispositions between groups of student test-takers” (Knutson, K, McCarthy-Tucker, S., 1993, p. 6). Training to teach teachers how to recognize giftedness in different cultures could help close the gap in underrepresentation of minority children in gifted education.

**Conclusion**

Under-representation of minority students in the gifted and talented programs has been a problem for years. Options to combat this problem include performance-based assessments, interviews, surveys, and authentic assessments. The problems several researchers noted with these alternate assessments are these tests are costly and take a considerable amount of time to administer and grade. I agree with Neumeister et al who stated “Teachers may also rely exclusively on characteristics of gifted students that appear on published documents without realizing that all gifted students do not demonstrate all of the characteristics” (2007, p. 480). I noticed that several of the researchers discussed the “deficit model” in which teachers focus on remediation more than identifying gifted and talented students. I concur with this finding. In the age of No Child Left Behind, teachers are concerned with students who may not demonstrate mastery on a specific test. Most of their energy goes to these students. Many teachers feel that the gifted and talented students will be just fine without any necessary accommodations. After reading the research, I realize that minority students are underrepresented in gifted programs and this problem has yet to be resolved.

**Future Research**

As I was reading, I noticed that some researchers tended to lump minority and economically disadvantaged students together which I would prefer to focus on one population (minority or economically disadvantaged). Some ideas for future research include the following: What are perceptions of giftedness held by teachers of economically disadvantaged students? To what extent are teachers in agreement with each identified student’s gifted qualifications? Does gifted placement from a Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test, impact student success in the gifted program? Does participation in gifted education increase college graduation rates?

To research the perceptions of giftedness held by teachers of economically disadvantaged students and the extent that teachers are in agreement with each identified student’s gifted qualifications, qualitative research should be conducted. To research the last two questions, quantitative research should be used. The hypotheses would be the following: Children placed in gifted programs based on Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability tests will show equal success in gifted programs based on academic grades. Students receiving gifted education will show greater graduation rates than students not receiving gifted education.

The methodologies for conducting the two qualitative studies would be random assignment and random selection of survey participants. The participants would be teachers in the United States from diverse educational settings. Data would need to be analyzed using coding and analysis of covariance.

To research if gifted placement from a Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test impacts student success in the gifted program, a researcher could use matching to compare the two groups of students. I believe you would need to match on age, gender, IQ, and the test that was used to place the student. Then, each of the research participants would need to be matched with two other research participants. This would give the researcher groups of three matched participants. Then, the researcher could randomly assign the participants to comparison groups. This follows the rule stated by Johnson and Christensen of randomizing whenever possible.

The methodology for conducting the research on graduation rates would be to have an experimental group (the students receiving gifted education) and a control group (the students not receiving gifted education). Surveys could be used to capture graduation rate information from the research participants. Data would need to be analyzed using coding and analysis of covariance. The main problem with this research is keeping all other variables constant to ensure that the gifted education is what is indeed impacting graduation rates. This would be a serious threat to validity if other variables were not controlled.

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