

The Under-Identification of Native American Students in Gifted and Talented Education
Programs

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Introduction

This paper is about the under identification of Native American students in gifted programs. As both a minority-gifted student and a teacher on the reservation, I have a unique perspective on the challenges school districts face in having a solid gifted program in indigenous service schools and communities. In general, Native American students face an education focused on remediation and closing achievement gaps rather than acceleration and advancement of giftedness. All other racial groups surpass Indigenous students' achievement scores; therefore, the stigma of remediation tends to outweigh the focus on acceleration. In addition, most Native Americans deal with a threefold challenge, including poverty, living in rural communities, and being part of a racial group that has been marginalized and forced to assimilate into this country's education system that often does not align with the culture and values of indigenous communities.

Most research and conversations about Native Americans focus on indigenous tribes as one homogenous group that is all the same. The reality is that indigenous students comprise 566 unique recognized tribes (Gentry et al., 2014). As a result, an education system or educational program designed for one indigenous population may not be culturally responsive for another tribe. Education systems must recognize the unique characteristics of each tribe and make sure programs fit the needs of the students in each school district serving indigenous populations.

In this paper, I will discuss the inconsistencies of gifted programs around this state and nation. It is important to note that there is no standard definition of giftedness accepted by all. In Arizona, a gifted and talented program is required by the school district, but the state minimally funds these programs. As a result, the school district is burdened with creating and staffing a program. Most rural districts lack a designated gifted and talented teacher, and most students identified as

gifted and talented are given more work and projects to do rather than genuinely differentiating for the program to meet the unique characteristics of indigenous students.

This Leadership Practice guide will focus on the needs of gifted and talented programs serving Native American students. This guide recommends some policy changes in this state and in the districts that serve Native students. As general recommendations, we must first eliminate the dependency on IQ and achievement tests to identify students and look at other aspects besides intelligence to determine giftedness. Secondly, we need to work on creating culturally responsive individualized plans that meet the needs of the students and respect their culture. Finally, we must educate our parents and community on giftedness and how to recognize it in their children. In addition, Parents need to be educated on how to participate in their child's education and how to advocate for their individual child's needs. Only by working in a culturally responsive way can we truly meet the needs of our students and make sure they are prepared for their future.

Context

As an educator working on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in eastern Arizona, I serve as a district administrator for the Whiteriver Unified School District. I am the Director of Curriculum and Instruction and oversee professional development, curriculum, and assessment for teachers. Whiteriver Unified has approximately 2500 students from PreK to 12th grade. The school district is 99% Native American, with most students identifying as White Mountain Apache. In addition, the school district serves the indigenous populations of Hopi, Navajo, and San Carlos Apache.

I have worked for the school district in various positions since 1999. I started as an instructional assistant, advanced to a teacher, then an instructional coach, and finally a principal before my

work as a district administrator. My parents moved to the reservation as missionaries in 1996. My family lived on the reservation for more than 20 years. Both passed away and are buried in the tribal cemetery. I am a Latina woman who grew up and attended school in Los Angeles, CA. I am an identified gifted minority student, but I never participated in a program in the schools I attended. None of the schools I attended had an active gifted program.

The research in this Leadership Practice Guide was conducted on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, home of the White Mountain Apache tribe. The Western Apache, also known as the White Mountain Apache, is one of the tribes of Apache. They live in New Mexico and Arizona. The Apache Tribe are among the few tribes living on their ancestral land because they invited the U.S. Cavalry to set up a camp at Fort Apache and live there in peace with the tribal village (White Mountain Apache Tribe, 2011). The Apache first went to Carlisle boarding school in Pennsylvania. Then, in 1891, the first school began in one of the barracks at Fort Apache by Castleberry (Whiteriver Unified School District, 2020).

Whiteriver Elementary was the first school of the Whiteriver Unified School District, opening its doors in 1955. Then Alchesay High School began a year later, in 1956 (2020). In 1891, Theodore Roosevelt Boarding School was started at Fort Apache by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (2020). Theodore Roosevelt Boarding School, a 6th-8th grade middle school, is one of two Bureau of Indian Education schools still operating on the reservation. There is also K-8 John F Kennedy School in Cedar Creek. The reservation has three public school districts- Whiteriver Unified School District, McNary School, and Cibecue Community School. McNary is a K-8 school, while Whiteriver and Cibecue are K-12 districts. Currently, these schools need more opportunities for indigenous students to accelerate their learning to reach their full potential.

Rationale

I intend to begin a narrative through this Leadership Practice Guide to address gifted programs in indigenous communities. I chose to write about the underrepresentation of Native Americans in gifted and talented programs because of my experience as a gifted minority student. I was given an IQ test at the age of 8 after scoring in the 99.9 percentile on the Stanford 9. I was given an IQ test and scored a 147. This identified me as gifted, but we had no programs or unique opportunities at my school for gifted students. I was also a gifted and talented educator. I received my training and certification while I was teaching in Texas.

The overrepresentation of Native students in special education has sparked a curiosity to study gifted programs on the reservation. I have worked on the reservation for almost two decades and am aware of the lack of programs in indigenous-serving schools, even though we officially have a gifted program. Most schools test students identified by parents or teachers. However, only a few students are placed each year, and most of these are identified because they are high achieving, which is usually not an indicator of giftedness. This past year, Whiteriver Unified School District and the public schools in the state of Arizona tested all 2nd-grade students in our school district.

As a school district, we only have a few students identified as gifted, and there is no active program with a specific gifted teacher to run a gifted program. The current process in my and many other school districts is to have the classroom teachers write individual action plans for their students. However, this just burdens the classroom teachers more and minimally serves the

giftedness in students. Teachers have to create a program for their students when they need more training on how to work with gifted students.

This Leadership Practice Guide focuses on researching successful gifted programs in reservation schools. It also identifies if schools have the appropriate representation of Native students in gifted programs. In addition, this Leadership Practice Guide explores culturally responsive programs that support our gifted Native students and helps leaders ensure their districts are responsive to the needs of our students and meet gifted students' needs in a productive way.

Topic Summary

Gifted and talented programs differ across this country. In Arizona, gifted and talented programs are required but minimally financed by the state. The reason for such variety in gifted programs across this country is there is no one definition for gifted and talented. “Giftedness is challenging to define because it can encompass many factors across a person’s academic, physical, social, and emotional ability and performance” (Lamparske & Pijanowski, 2022, p. 1). When teachers think about giftedness, they usually think about the brilliant students who are compliant and turn in their homework. However, the concept of giftedness began in the 1920s with the work of Louis Terman, the father of IQ testing in America. After more than 100 years of research and training on giftedness, there is still little to no agreement on a definition (Bines, 1991). So often, it simply relies on IQ and focuses on intelligent kids.

The research identified five models of identifying gifted and talented students. These programs vary based on the state and local decision-making. Sturnberg and Subotnik identified these five decision-making models:

- 1) Single cutoff – the school district uses a single assessment score from a specific assessment, such as an IQ score to determine whether a student qualifies for gifted services;
- 2) Single cutoff: flexible criterion – school districts use a single score, but the score can be from one of several assessments as determined by the district;
- 3) Multiple cutoff – students are required to score above a predetermined score on multiple assessments;
- 4) Averaging – scores from multiple assessments are averaged in order to determine qualification;
- 5) Dynamic – a student’s giftedness is measured by comparing their score on an initial assessment with their score on the same assessment after a period of time. (2000, p. 891).

Most districts chose to align themselves with one of these practices. This helps the school district identify students needing gifted and talented services.

Most gifted programs in this country do not serve a representative sample of students. “In 2017–18, for example, 1.6 million elementary-school students were enrolled in gifted programs out of 23.6 million students overall, or 6.9 percent of total enrollment” (Thompson, 2023, p. 56). Most of these programs tend to be pull-out programs (2023). These programs predominantly consist of White and Asian students, with a relatively small portion of the gifted population being a minority. Native American students are rarely allowed to participate in gifted and talented programs.

Right now, gifted and talented programs are exclusive. They rely on parents advocating for their students to get them tested and identified. This leads to an elitist program where the more educated parents obtain the services needed, and others do not. These programs are built to

appease parents and keep them in the school system. So, these students are tested and offered differentiated education (Bines, 1991). This leads to a gifted population in most schools that is not representative of the community they serve.

“As a group, Native American students are not afforded educational opportunities equal to other American students” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003, p. xi). Native Americans have experienced lower scores on achievement and academic tests. This has led to a deficit, remedial model of the education system for them (Herring, 1996). This is why relying on those tests alone will not help to identify gifted and talented students on our reservation.

Unfortunately, most Native American students with giftedness will go unrecognized due to the overreliance on achievement tests. As a result, it is essential to look at how students are identified and what assessment tools are used. In the Whiteriver School District, the Cognitive Abilities Test, or CogAT, assesses students. This assessment was used by all school districts in the state as a universal screener in the 2012-2013 school year. Recommendations in the research were for schools with Native Americans to help develop and recognize strengths in naturalist, spiritual, leadership, visual-spatial, art, music, creative problem-solving, and communication domains (Gentry & Fugate, 2012). Looking at other tools approved by the state can also help recognize skills in the areas that best represent indigenous talents.

A recommendation for school districts is to look at a system like the one created in the Lower Kuskowim School District in Southern Alaska. This may be a first step to better representation of giftedness in indigenous populations. The district has “twenty-six schools scattered across 44,000 square miles of subarctic wilderness, most accessible only by air and, in summer, boat” (Bines, 1991, p. 17). The Lower Kuskowim School District director “devised a new, more Eskimo-centric process, relying on a larger understanding of the nature of giftedness to reflect

particular Yup'ik cultural manifestations of giftedness and to include such qualities as ‘Task Commitment, Creativity, Leadership, and Artistic or Performing Arts’” (1991). The district created a checklist screening process to help identify more students and identify unique things in them that make them gifted. It included culturally specific characteristics such as storytelling, respect of elders, and creativity to determine a more diverse collection of students.

The research that has been done on gifted and talented programs usually eliminates Native Americans because they are such a small part of the educational population and an even smaller portion of the gifted and talented people. Most of the research is dated, like the work done in Alaska, but educators can learn things from the existing literature. “The homogeneous view of Native Americans within past gifted education literature leads to stereotyping and overgeneralization and results in little nuanced understanding of how to discover and develop gifts and talents among these diverse youth” (Gentry et al., 2014, p. 99). The plan a school district makes needs to be focused on the needs of the students on our reservation and within our school district. The Whiteriver Unified School District is 99% Native American, with the prominent tribe being White Mountain Apache because we are located on the reservation. This means Whiteriver Unified School District should be aware of characteristics in our Indigenous students, who in other places might not get recognized as a gifted trait.

Additional research compared the gifted and talented programs on the Navajo, Standing Rock, and Red Lake reservations. The study was conducted with educators to confirm assumptions, identify misconceptions, and add new understanding to gifted and talented education on the reservations (Gentry et al., 2014). The research identified that of the research done over the last 30 years, very little included Native American students (2014). The study concluded that emphasizing four areas can help identify giftedness in indigenous populations. Those four areas

are Talent Development, Cultures and Traditions, Cognitive Styles and Learning Preferences, and Communication. The research analyzed the differences in these areas on the different reservations. Researchers spoke to parents, students, and teachers and gained knowledge about the programs they had on their reservation but also made recommendations for the future.

In general, Native or indigenous students face a “triple threat”: First, they deal with poverty.

Indigenous students deal with unemployment rates more than four times the national average

(Gentry and Fugate, 2012). Second, they live in rural communities that do not offer them

opportunities in a metropolitan setting. For example, many do not have access to technology or

essential resources that many in the city take for granted. High-speed internet, running water, and

electricity are not guaranteed in all the communities on the reservation. Finally, their culture is

often marginalized by the world they live in. All these circumstances make it difficult for

indigenous students to gain the skills they need and to be supported to meet their needs.

Another challenge to addressing giftedness in Native populations is finding the best-gifted

programs. Most gifted and talented programs consist of teachers writing an individualized plan

for the student. It is essential to look at the students themselves rather than creating a one-size-

fits-all project for them. The gifted and talented Native American students need to participate in

the planning and implementing of their plan and be able to individualize it for themselves and

their learning style. “To ensure that a program is effective, the Native community needs to be

directly involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating the program and its philosophy”

(Herring, 1996, p. 8). This means that we are obligated to the parents to explain how to recognize

giftedness in their children and help request testing and identification for their students.

The research also notes that identifying and introducing students to role models can help students

identify plans. A Diné focus group looked at the need for positive male role models and the lack

of them in their society, which can lead to boys not wanting to be identified as positive role models and an increase in both alcoholism and drug use in the teens (Gentry et al., 2014). By introducing students to positive role models, we can help them identify people they can relate to and introduce them to ideas for their future. It also allows students to be introduced to post-secondary and career options.

“What passes for good gifted education—the individual attention, the emphasis on critical thinking, the encouragement of creative potential, the high expectations, the exciting enrichment experiences—is just good education, period (Bines, 1991, p. 18). This is what all our students deserve, even the students residing on the reservations. An education that is differentiated, interesting, and challenging. An education that increases the creative capacity of our students.

Implementation Plan

The first recommendation for implementing a culturally responsive gifted program is to have universal screening for gifted and talented students throughout this state. Research done by the Fordham Institute notes that using a universal screener increases identification of those utilizing subsidized meals by 180 percent, a 130 percent increase in Latinos, and an 80 percent increase among African Americans (Ferguson, 2016). By having a universal screener rather than parent or teacher recommendation drive our gifted education program, we will have students identified who might otherwise fall through the cracks. A universal screener ensures equity for students.

The second recommendation is that training for parents needs to be developed and utilized in school districts to help parents and teachers recognize giftedness in their students and help them advocate for their students to be assessed. Training needs to acknowledge the importance of culture and incorporate tribal identity to personalize it for students. Especially in Native American families, historical trauma from school makes it difficult for them to have a

relationship with the school. It is essential that the school is open and welcoming to parents and makes them feel like they can come in and their voice is heard.

The final recommendation is that Individual action plans be created in collaboration with the student and the parent. The student's strengths must be recognized and used to create this plan with a particular emphasis on their preferred learning styles. The program should not just be extra work but something that builds the students' skills and supports their interests.

All these recommendations will help a school district become culturally responsive and meet the needs of its students. These recommendations will help increase the number of students identified, thus increasing equity amongst indigenous students. In addition, professional development can help the district be proactive rather than reactive to the needs of the students. Finally, allowing the students and parents to participate in creating action plans will make them personalized and responsive to the student's needs.

Assessment

The first area to address is the choice of an assessment tool. In contrast, Arizona mandates a specific tool, but that is only true of some states. It is critical to utilize an assessment tool as a universal screener. "When assessments are administered, universal screening can ensure that all students are considered for gifted services" (Lamparske & Pijanowski, 2022, p.8). Universal screeners are given to all students rather than focusing on pre-screened or identified individuals. This is a crucial first step in identifying gifted students.

After adopting a universal screening tool, it is crucial to create a personalized tool and process that evaluates student behavior to identify gifted characteristics. The customized process could include "nominations from persons other than teachers, using checklists designed specifically for culturally diverse populations, developing culture-specific identification systems, and developing

programs that eliminate experiential and language deficits before assessment” (Herring, 1996, p. 7-8). In creating these tools, it is essential to have conversations with tribal members in the school district and community members to help identify these skills and understandings.

Another evaluation method would be accessing the involvement of parents and the community in the process. To make sure we are an effective program, the Native community must be involved in the complete process, from the creation or identification of an assessment tool, helping to create professional development for the staff and parents, and finally, making individual plans for gifted and talented students. This will help parents to identify giftedness in their children and help them to advocate for their families. This means that the schools have to be places parents want to be. Finally, community members must be involved in the school as role models. This will allow students to see tribal members who are in a variety of careers and educational opportunities.

Finally, we need to access individual action plans. As a school system, monitoring student plans and ensuring they are not one-size-fits-all plans is critical. All plans must be individualized and utilize student learning styles to meet the student's needs. This will require monitoring by the district office and helping the staff adapt the plans to be individualized rather than generalized.

All four of these steps will help implement a district plan to make sure gifted and talented programs are culturally responsive and meet the needs of Native American students.

As long as minority students are under-identified in gifted programs, the system will continue not to be culturally responsive. Schools need to look at their general demographic data and compare it with their gifted and talented data. Are all populations represented in the gifted and talented demographic data? Does it match our demographic breakdown? If not, systems need to be analyzed and changes made so all populations are invited to participate and allowed to be a

part of the program. This program needs to be driven by our community, not the needs of a few parents who demand testing for their students.

Resources

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