



## **Policy and Practice Barriers to Equity in Gifted and Talented Identification**

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**Abstract:** Varied, and often, subjective definitions of giftedness, along with bias and reduced access are often factors leading to the identification of relatively few students of color, non-native English speakers, and students living in poverty for gifted and talented services. The policy language on gifted identification shifts across federal, state, and local levels which often creates ambiguity and results in a heavy reliance on parent and teacher referral. This paper explores barriers to equity throughout the policy landscape for children receiving gifted services and how those policies may ultimately be realized and interpreted by local educators and parents.

**Keywords:** Gifted and Talented, Equity, English Language Learners, Special Education

### **Introduction**

The concept of giftedness is challenging to define because it can encompass many factors across a person's academic, physical, social, and emotional ability and performance. This lack of a consensus has led to the Federal government, most individual states, and various educational organizations each having unique operational definitions of giftedness. While sharing several characteristics, the way various agencies define giftedness does not perfectly align so it is common for schools to be making decisions with several conflicting messages about giftedness. For example, the US Department of Education (1993) describes gifted children as those "with outstanding talent who perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment" (p. 11). In contrast, the Minnesota Department of Education (2020) describes that gifted and talented children and youth are:

those students with outstanding abilities, identified at preschool, elementary, and secondary levels. The potential of gifted students requires differentiated and challenging educational programs and/or services beyond those provided in the general school program. Students capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement or potential ability in any one or more of the following areas: general intellectual, specific academic subjects, creativity, leadership and visual and performing arts (para. 1).

Additionally, The National Association for Gifted Children (2010) defines gifted individuals as those:

who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports) (para. 1).

The impetus for writing this paper comes from the author's local context which relies heavily on parent and teacher referral. The lack of a recently developed, collectively agreed upon, district-wide definition of giftedness that is broadly communicated to stakeholders, forces the referrer to rely on their subjective definition of giftedness when determining who to recommend for services. This lack of standardization likely causes district-wide discrepancy in qualification criteria. Additionally, the current process requires the Gifted and Talented Coordinator to serve as a gate keeper in determining students' qualifications using a non-standardized process. This one person's definition of giftedness could also dramatically impact program requirements. The lack of a standardized process extends to the way the assessment data is used. Some clear qualifying cut-off scores have been established for certain assessments, while others are left up to the discretion of the coordinator based on program capacity. The overall lack of a standardized process for identifying gifted students increases the potential for personal bias and other barriers to impact equity within the program. Furthermore, since the current assessments are primarily designed to determine academic proficiency, rather than cognitive ability or creativity, there is a possibility that eligibility is being determined by students' ability to "do school" rather than their aptitude for processing, problem solving or creative thinking.

What can be gleaned from these varied definitions is that intelligence and/or giftedness can take many forms. Students can be gifted in non-traditional ways and their giftedness may present itself in multiple domains including such things as the arts, cognitive ability, leadership, or specific academic content areas (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The more ambiguous a process is at the point of implementation the more non-relevant factors can play a role (Lasater, et al., 2021; Pijanowski & Brady, 2021). For example, the relative age of a student can become a powerful influence on how evaluators perceive student ability (Dogan et al., 2021; Dogan & Pijanowski, 2011).

The lack of a standard, agreed upon definition has led to the idea that giftedness may not actually be specifically definable, that it may in fact be a socially constructed phenomenon (Pfeiffer, 2012). If this is the case, some would argue that the act of defining it, may be futile or in fact harmful. Siegle, et. al. (2016) suggests that “Even the act of defining gifted students as a single population neglects the vast diversity among student populations” (p. 3). If giftedness is simply a social construct, then it could be expected that many of the biases that are present within society would the impact how it is defined. Society’s notions around race, gender and class can inequitably impact who is identified as gifted (Parekh, et. al., 2018).

### **Gifted Identification**

Because giftedness is complex and the definition is not universally agreed upon, identifying students as gifted can be complicated and controversial. However difficult, “a transparent, research-based, and purposeful identification process is a critical first process in providing appropriate learning opportunities to gifted youth” (Hodges, Tay, Maeda & Gentry, 2018, p. 148). School districts’ methods for determining giftedness can vary greatly. These methods can either be determined by state mandate or local policy. Sturnberg and Subotnik (2000) identified five decision-making models that organizations use in determining students’ giftedness. Most organizations’ practices align with one of these five 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.

Hodges (2013) asserts that when it comes to gifted identification, the “selection of suitable tests, checklists and tools for each student is important (p. 1). This decision about what type(s) of assessment(s) an organization will use and who it will be administered to, appears to hinge on two debates: 1) Whether intelligence is an observable fixed trait or something that can be developed over time. 2) Whether intelligence is defined as cognitive, academic ability or includes a broader aptitude in additional, more non-traditional domains. An organization’s stance on these two issues will determine how and when they assess students for gifted programming. If an organization believes that intelligence is innate and unchanging, they may tend to assess students less frequently. If a student is identified as having high cognitive ability, then that is who they are and who they will always be. There is no need for further assessment. Likewise, if a student does not meet the criteria for being gifted, then they never will, and it is not necessary to administer any subsequent assessment. Interestingly, students must be reevaluated periodically in every other domain of school i.e., special education, athletic teams, etc. (Pfeiffer, 2012). If an organization’s philosophy includes the belief that intelligence can be developed over time, then they are likely to assess and reassess students more

frequently utilizing the methods similar to the dynamic method proposed by Sternberg and Subotnik (2000). Those organizations whose philosophy on intelligence focuses primarily on cognitive ability and academic achievement will be more likely to utilize a single cutoff model for gifted determination, while those who believe in a broader definition of intelligence will likely use a multiple cutoff or averaging model often including assessments from multiple domains.

Most school districts rely heavily, if not solely on traditional cognitive ability assessments to determine eligibility for gifted programming (Brown, et. al., 2005). These assessments are designed to measure things such as students' quantitative ability, working memory, perceptual reasoning, processing speed and verbal comprehension. The most common of these assessments determine a student's Intelligence Quotient or IQ. Examples of these individually administered assessments are the Stanford-Benet, Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the Woodcock Johnson (NAGC, n.d.; MDE, 2020; Loveless, 2020). While this type of testing may identify some students with exceptional abilities, many current authorities believe that relying only on IQ testing for identifying gifted students is too simplistic and clings to the false pretense that giftedness is an inherent and fixed trait (Pfeiffer, 2012). Many experts believe that intelligence and giftedness is complex and cannot necessarily be quantified by a single number. (McCluskey, 2017). McCluskey (2017) argues that IQ tests tell us "little about creativity, morals, values and perseverance..." (p. 195). Moreover, some researchers believe the practice of establishing cutoff scores using IQ is problematic because students who score one point apart could be labeled as gifted and not gifted, respectively (Borland, 2009). There are also several cognitive ability tests that can be administered in group settings, either through a universal screening model or with predetermined groups of students. These assessments do not offer IQ scores, but can present comprehensive data on student's intellectual strengths. Examples of these assessments are the CogAt and the Otis-Lennon (NAGC, n.d.; MDE, 2020; Loveless, 2020).

In addition to cognitive ability tests, academic assessments measure the learned knowledge of students and compare their performance with peers (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). Examples of these assessments are the Iowa Test of Basic Skill (ITBS), Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT). (NAGC, n.d.; MDE, 2020; Loveless, 2020). These assessments can serve as the basis for gifted services qualification or as a reason to refer for further assessment.

With the theories of Renzulli (1978), Gardner (1983) and Gagne (1985) in mind, some school districts have chosen to utilize a more comprehensive approach to assessing students' abilities and aptitudes. Organizations using these practices subscribe to the belief that giftedness is more complex and nuanced than simply possessing high cognitive ability. The National Association for Gifted Children (n.d.) identifies five domains where students may exhibit giftedness: intellectual, academic, creative, artistic, and leadership. Organizations with a more comprehensive view of giftedness, will commit to assess students in multiple domains. In addition to the intellectual and academic assessments previously

referenced, assessments to gauge students' abilities in the additional domains of creativity, artistic talent and leadership can be utilized. Examples of assessments in these areas are behavioral rating scales such as Gifted Rating Scales (GRS), Scales for Identifying Gifted Students (SIGS) and Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (MDE, 2020; Westberg, 2011). Moreover, assessments specifically focused on measuring creativity include the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking and the Profile of Creative Abilities (Kaufman, Plucker & Russell, 2012). Assessments specific to gauging leadership ability include personality tests, observation, and interviews (Phillips, 2009).

The decision of which students to assess can vary greatly between school districts. A student can either be initially referred based on an established assessment performance criteria or by an adult (teacher or parent) based on observed knowledge of the student's abilities (Hodges, et. al., 2018; NCAG, n.d.). Many organizations follow a two-step system for identification including a nomination stage and a confirmation stage (McBee, et. al., 2016). This often involves the use of universal screening as an initial assessment strategy. Universal screening refers to the practice of administering an assessment "to all eligible students, as opposed to only those who meet some other initial criteria" (MDE, 2020, para. 2). In theory, universal screening allows for all students to be considered for gifted services. By contrast, other organizations' gifted assessment process is only initiated for students who demonstrate high ability based on identified criteria. For example, students may be assessed if they score high on existing academic tests or if they achieve at high levels on academic content. Diagnostic assessments often follow to confirm superior knowledge and/or ability in the assessed disciplines. Regarding adult observer referral, teachers and/or parents often initiate the gifted assessment process through a recommendation based on factors such as anecdotal observation of perceived strengths and talents, high academic achievement, and formal or informal behavioral checklists or rating scales that align with the organization's definition of giftedness (NAGC, n.d.; Renzulli, 2008).

### **Inequity in Gifted Education**

The underrepresentation of students who belong to racial minority groups, particularly Black and Hispanic, can serve as evidence of inequity in gifted programming (Ford, 2012). Black and Hispanic Students, as well as those that receive free and reduced lunch and English language learners are less likely to be identified as gifted (Siegle, et.al., 2016). In fact, they are "2.5 times less likely to be identified and served in gifted and talented programs, even if they're achieving at the same level as their white, more majority peers" (Islas, 2017, para. 6). If equity were a reality in gifted identification and programming, racial subgroups' percentage of the total population would more closely mirror their enrollment in gifted education. However, the Mid Atlantic Equity Center (2009) reports that historically, "the percentage of minority students constituting gifted and talented programs is below their percentage make up of total enrollment" (para. 1). According to the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014), Black students made up 15 percent of the students in the U.S. public schools that offer gifted services in 2011-2012, yet only 9 percent of those identified as gifted. Moreover, Hispanic students made up 25 percent of the total

student population in schools that offer gifted programming and only 17 of the students who were identified as gifted. In contrast, white students made of 50% of the school enrollment and 60% of those receiving gifted services.

Students whose who are identified as English Language Learners are also underrepresented in gifted programs relative to their overall population (Callahan, 2005). In fact, "their representation in gifted and talented education continues to lag behind all other types of learners" (Langley, 2016, para. 1). In 2017, there were 5 million English Language Learners in U.S. schools. This represents 10.1% of all students (NCES, 2020). However, less than three percent of the students in gifted and talented programs are identified as ELL (Harwin & Sparks, 2017).

In addition to race and language, gender appears to impact students' likelihood to be identified as gifted. According to the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2012), since the late 1970's, girls have outnumbered boys in gifted and talented program enrollment. In 2009, 7.4% of boys were enrolled in gifted programming while 8.1% of girls participated in gifted services. Despite these figures being relatively close, referrals for gifted and talented programming are still influenced by gender stereotypes (Bianco et. al., 2011). In some cases, students are more likely to be nominated for gifted services if they do not conform to the stereotypes that the nominators hold. For example, if a teacher believes that males are stronger math students, they may be more likely to nominate a female student who is excelling in mathematics than they would a male student (Bianco et. al., 2011).

Finally, a student's socioeconomic status can impact the prospect that they will receive gifted and talented services (Van Tassel & Stambaugh, 2007). According to Hamilton et. al. (2018), "Even when they exhibit equally high mathematics and reading achievement, FRL students were less likely to be identified for gifted services than non-FRL students" (p. 20).

Grissom, Redding, and Bleiberg (2019) found that "among students in the top 1% of math scores, the probability that a student in the highest SES quintile will receive gifted services is about 13 percentage points greater than students in the first quintile. In reading, the difference is 7 percentage points" (p. 19).

### **Barriers to Identification**

The underrepresentation of certain groups of students indicates that barriers exist that prevent those groups from being equitably identified for gifted and talented services (Ford, 2001; Ford 2010; Siegle, et. al., 2016). There are many potential barriers that can account for this imbalance including referrer knowledge and understanding of giftedness and their cultural competency and biases, culturally biased assessments and curriculum, and limited family access to information. These "barriers exist due to misconceptions, misperceptions, and lack of awareness or knowledge of what to look for" (Grensing-Pophal, 2017, p. 21).

Many programs rely on teacher or parent referral for initial consideration for gifted services. This practice positions these adults as the gatekeepers for gifted services.

Establishing these roles can be problematic given that individuals' definition of giftedness as well as held biases can influence who is referred. Ford (2010) identifies the scarcity of teacher referral as one of the roadblocks preventing Black and Hispanic students from being identified as gifted. Moon & Brighton (2008) assert that "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..." (p. 449). Referrers' biases can also influence who is referred. Szymanski and Shaff (2013) assert that "teacher's attitudes and understanding of culturally diverse learners may play a large role in the selection of these students for special programs" (p. 5). Pigott and Cowen (2000) found that teachers judged African American students, in particular, to have less educational promise than their white peers. Furthermore, Elhoweris (2008) asserts that "perceptions about economically disadvantaged students combined with a lack of cultural understanding may undermine the ability of educators to recruit economically disadvantaged students into gifted education" (p. 35). Teachers' nominations of students for gifted and talented programming often aligns to the values of the dominant culture (Peterson, 1999).

The current assessment practices used to identify students for gifted and talented services in schools are often limited and rely on traditional measures of intelligence rather than on factors such as creativity, leadership or problem solving. One of the proposed reasons for this is that, "most tests of ability or intelligence assume some level of similarity in background experience for a given normative group" (Peters & Engerrand, 2016, p. 161). The problem with this assumption of course, is that students possess an extremely diverse set of background experiences, including degree and sequence of their exposure to academic content. Therefore, comparing a diverse group of students to each other in this way is not an effective method for accurately assessing their ability or creativity. The lack of universal testing and testing that goes beyond traditional measures can prevent those students who do not score high on traditional assessment from being identified as gifted. Ford (2010) argues that "students' differential performance on traditional intelligence and/or achievement tests" (p. 32) serves as a barrier to identification for Black and Hispanic students. According to Hodges et al., (2018), "if schools are only using IQ scores to identify gifted students, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students who may not have the opportunities to develop their gifted potential are not likely to be identified and served" (p. 149). Additionally, when identification measures rely heavily on language, either verbal or written, this can place students with lower English language proficiency at a great disadvantage for qualifying for gifted and talented services (Mun, et. al., 2016).

Finally, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences between families and the dominant culture can lead to issues of access for students of color, English Language Learners and those living in poverty. These differences "have served as stumbling blocks to establishing effective home-school partnerships. The involvement of minority families in the recruitment and retention process is incomplete without early, ongoing, and substantive family involvement" (Ford, 1998, p. 11). This lack of family involvement can lead to limited understanding of both gifted indicators and the gifted identification process.

### **Strategies to Reduce Inequity in Gifted Education**

The research identifies several elements of school, that if addresses effectively, can better ensure equity within the schools' gifted and talented programs. Assessment, Curriculum, Teacher Preparedness, Family/Community Engagement, and Cultural Competency are all critical components to ensuring equity in serving all students with exceptional needs (NAGC, 2008; Ford, 1998).

It is critical that students' eligibility for gifted services not be determined by a single measure but by multiple measures that vary in the level of standardization, the response format, method of material presentation, and the assessed content or constructs (NAGC, n.d.). Multiple assessments should be explored that measure aspects outside of the traditional academic realm. Creative thinking, cognitive aptitude, problem solving, and motivation should be considered when identifying students' abilities. According to Hodges, et al. (2018) "Some identification methods for giftedness combine elements from traditional and nontraditional forms of assessment by including a nonverbal component in the testing. This is done in hope of reducing the language bias that may exist within traditional verbal and quantitative assessments" (p. 149). Nonverbal intelligence assessments such as the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test and the TONI-4 Test of Nonverbal Intelligence can be utilized to ensure that verbal ability and language proficiency are not impediments to identification. With any assessments, cut-off scores should be avoided. "High scores should be used to include students, but if students meet other criteria, then lower test scores should not be exclusionary" (TEA, 2015). One strategy to increase diversity in gifted education is the practice of establishing group specific norms. Group specific norms can "enhance the use of achievement measures to yield more proportional representation of underserved students in gifted programs" (Peters & Gentry, 2012, p. 140). In addition, identification should not be a one-time assessment. If, like many believe, intelligence is dynamic and not fixed, a process should be created with organizations to continually assess new students and reassess previously identified students to ensure that they are being properly served. When assessments are administered, universal screening can be used to ensure that all students are considered for gifted services. The practice of universal screening for gifted identification has been shown to increase the representation of low income and culturally diverse students in gifted education (Card & Giuliano, 2016).

If schools are to ensure equity in gifted education, it is critical that they take steps to make certain that core curriculum, as well as the curriculum specifically targeting gifted students be thoughtfully designed and implemented. A well-developed core curriculum is vital in guaranteeing that the skills and talents of all students are being developed. This curriculum should then be effectively differentiated to meet the individual needs of gifted students (Berger, 1991). Tailoring the curriculum to the needs of the learners is more likely to create a culture that fosters the demonstration and identification of giftedness. A "design down" curricular model can be used where the learning is designed with an outcome in mind that promotes a high level of readiness for all students and can be modified based on the need of the student. "Enrichment-oriented" models can also be used. These models tend to

focus on the learning process and typically hold a broader view of giftedness (Van Tassel-Baska & Brown, 2014). To elicit critical thinking and problem solving that is good for all students, but also aligns particularly well with the needs of gifted students, a thinking curriculum should also be considered. "Thinking curricula fulfill a dual agenda by integrating content and process. Within this agenda, students develop habits of mind with respect to learning that serve them well both in school and in the real world" (Fennimore & Tinzmann, 1990, p.1). A thinking curriculum can offer an emergent talent experience as part of a more comprehensive talent nurturing model. These models should "include experiences for students that prepare them for the formal identification process" (Siegle, et al., 2016, p. 21).

Professional development opportunities that enhance teachers' understanding of gifted students and that provide teachers with the knowledge that they need to accurately identify and teach students with exceptional needs, is critical to eliminating the existing inequities. Ideally school leaders play an active role in developing professional development opportunities that reflect the local context and current dialogue on gifted identification (Koonce, et al., 2019). Ford (1998) asserts that "The ability of teachers to work effectively with gifted minority students will increase based on staff development efforts and teacher education preparation" (p. 11). Unfortunately, "Few teacher preparation programs require coursework in differentiation for gifted and advanced learners or strategies for teaching advanced classes and content. Thus, even when teachers want to help-and many do-they lack the knowledge and skills to do so" (Rakow, 2012, p. 35). The National Association for Gifted Children (n.d.) has identified five critical areas for educator professional development. These areas are needed if schools are to effectively develop and identify gifted students from populations that have been historically underserved.

- Learning characteristics and behaviors of underrepresented gifted populations
- Awareness of cultural differences
- Children with multiple exceptionalities
- Developing positive peer culture in the classroom and school
- Equitable and nonbiased assessments

Hansen & Feldhusen (1994) found that teachers who are specifically trained in gifted education practices are better able to meet the needs of gifted students. Interestingly, they also develop classroom climates that are more positive. Furthermore, methods should be explored to guide teachers in developing a growth mindset. "Teachers with a growth mindset appreciate the incremental nature of all learning, and are better able to provide a good match, whether a student is ahead of grade-level curriculum or behind" (Foster & Matthews, 2013, para. 10). Teachers with a highly developed growth mindset and work in a culture of intellectual humility will be more likely to accurately identify students from underserved populations who are displaying non-traditional indicators of giftedness (Pijanowski & Lasater, 2020).

If the schools wish to create equity in their gifted and talented identification and services, they must develop a high level of cultural competency among staff. It is paramount that teachers be able to effectively work with and understand the

diverse population of students in their classroom and in their school (Ford, 2012). They must also be “committed to removing barriers to accessing gifted education services” (Ford, Dickson, Davis, Scott & Grantham, 2018, p. 127). A high level of cultural competency will allow teachers, administrators, and support staff to understand the distinctions in students’ methods, strategies and ways of thinking that may be different from the majority but have roots in their unique backgrounds and experiences. Supporting school staff in the development of cultural competency can reduce the existence of ignorance and indifference which together leads to the “poor referral and identification process of under-represented groups in gifted education” (Wright, Ford & Young, 2017, p. 48). If we are going to rely on teachers, at least in part, to refer students for gifted education services, they “need education, training, and support to develop the skills to make these recommendations” (Szymanski & Shaff, 2013, p. 2).

Finally, families and community members, particularly those in traditionally underserved populations, must be educated and empowered to identify, foster, and support the learning associated with giftedness. Schools should develop a structured plan to engage families and create an open, safe direct home-school communication and education plan concerning gifted education with the families of ELL, minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and special education students. Ford & Harmon (2001) contend that schools “must make sure that diverse families know that the school district offers gifted education services, understand referral and screening measures and procedures, and know how placement decisions are made” (p. 145). Grantham, et. al. (2005) suggests that:

When parents of culturally diverse gifted students are informed and actively involved in the educational policy and practices related to gifted students, they are in a better position to advocate on their children’s behalf and to proactively address issues of equality and excellence.

According to Kitano (2003), “Parents and families are among the most important influences on children’s academic performance, particularly in families most at risk for school failure based on poverty” (p. 298). Of particular importance is the families’ role in referral for gifted services since they can observe students in multiple situations and settings on a daily basis. Families must be involved in the “screening, identification, and placement process (Ford, 1998, p. 11). If families in underserved populations are educated on the behavioral indicators of giftedness, they could more accurately and responsibly refer their children for assessment (TEA, 2015). In addition, those families should be informed about in-home and extra-curricular strategies and opportunities to support the learning of their gifted student. Community mentors have also been shown to be effective resources for gifted students (Berger, 1990). Adults who have excelled in an area that is of interest to a gifted child can serve as motivator, and advocate for disadvantaged students.

In some school communities, effectively addressing one of these elements of inequity may very well produce more equitable outcomes within their gifted programming. Most communities, however, will likely need to employ a

comprehensive plan that addresses multiple elements to produce long term systemic change.

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