

Chapter 3

Improving Access and Advancing Equity: A Reconsideration of Barriers and Solutions to Multilingual Learner Access to Gifted Programs

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ABSTRACT

The underrepresentation of linguistically diverse gifted learners continues to be a pervasive issue in schools across the United States. Many leaders in the field recognize the problem of this inequitable access to gifted education programs. In light of this persistent challenge, the present chapter critically examines the barriers that gifted multilanguage learners (ML) face that can hinder or prevent their access to gifted and talented programs to identify promising solutions and actionable changes. To achieve these ends, the following chapter unfolds in two parts. First, the authors examine four avenues through which gifted ML students may be identified and referred to gifted and talented programs to critically consider potential obstacles they face and solutions to those obstacles. Second, the authors then present the “talent development” model, combined with insights from Culturally Relevant Teaching, as a way to construct classroom environments that make the identification of gifted ML students more likely.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS

The underrepresentation of ethnically and linguistically diverse gifted learners and gifted students from lower socio-economic groups continues to be a pervasive issue in schools across the United States (Esquierdo & Arreguín-Anderson, 2012; Yoon & Gentry, 2009; Ford, 2013). Disproportionality in gifted education is not a new phenomenon. Despite addressing the needs and readiness of gifted learners, VanTassel-Baska (2021) claims that gifted programming has been met with “hostility and suspicion” (p. 44) when it comes to meeting the needs of underrepresented students. According to Ford (2010), the roadblocks to increasing participation of students from underserved populations, such as Hispanic and Black students, have not changed dramatically in the past 20 years:

The most recent findings from the Office of Civil Rights (U.S. DOE, Office for Civil Rights, 2016) show that of students enrolled at “schools offering gifted and talented programs (GATE)” (p. 6), Black and Latinx children are 42% of the student population and White children are 49% of the student population. However, the student population actually in the GATE programs in these schools is only 28% Black and Latinx but 57% White, clear evidence of unequal representation in GATE programs. (Hurt, 2018, p.123, italics original)

Although the English Language Learner (ELL) school population continues increasing nationwide, these students remain underrepresented gifted programs across the country (Pereira & de Oliveira, 2015; Coronado & Lewis, 2017).

A major reason underrepresentation continues to plague gifted programs is the idea of deficit thinking (Ford, 2010; Harris et al, 2009; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Allen 2017; Wright et al., 2017). Wright et al. (2017) argue, “Historically, advocates for greater numbers of Black and Brown faces in gifted and advanced programs have been confronted by White power brokers or establishments that view difference as a deficit” (p. 48). Deficit thinking encompasses the “belief that culturally different students are genetically and culturally inferior to White students” (Ford, 2010, p. 32). Payne (2011) agrees that deficit thinking continues to be a barrier to identification.

Many leaders in the field of gifted education recognize the problem of this inequitable access to gifted education programs (Esquierdo & Arreguín-Anderson, 2012; Yoon & Gentry, 2009; Ford, 2013). Over a decade ago, the National Association of Gifted Children recognized this need, writing in a position statement,

Identifying and serving culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD) enriches the fabric of gifted education and cultivates what is still an untapped national resource. To promote equitable access and school success for CLD students, schools and supportive organizations need to be strategic, purposeful, and committed to altering common identification and programming practices. Current policies, procedures, procedures, and practices need to be thoroughly examined and defensible identification protocols developed and implemented. Effective teaching and learning models and school support services should also be intentionally designed to address the specific needs of CLD students. (NAGC, 2011)

While the problem of inequitable access remains a recognized reality, the challenge educators and educational leaders face is identifying practical and effective solutions.

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