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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses problems related to identification of gifted Hispanic children in rural areas. While the federal definition of giftedness is subscribed to by most states, local districts tend to seek and find White, middle-class academic achievers. One problem associated with identification of gifted minorities is that the research and literature on minorities has focused more on deficits than on strengths. Obstacles to identification include language differences, inappropriate use of I.Q. information, differences in home and cultural backgrounds, effects of poverty, limited out-of-school educational experiences, and racial or ethnic bias. In assessing student abilities, it is essential to understand that each instrument or procedure measures only one of many facets. Measures that go beyond academic achievement must be used to find students whose abilities are not indicated by tests and school performance. Three major types of educational adaptations for the gifted Hispanic student are suggested: counseling to help students caught between conflicting cultures, the building of self-knowledge, and the development of meaningful curriculum adaptations. Six suggestions are listed to help parents, counselors, and teachers work successfully with culturally diverse gifted learners. Contains 26 references. (CDS)

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RURAL HISPANIC CHILDREN AND GIFTEDNESS: WHY THE DIFFICULTY IN IDENTIFICATION?

Juan is a bright nine-year-old Hispanic student. He was retained in second grade and referred for special education services in the rural community in which he lives. His lack of proficiency in English has interfered with his learning to read. Juan is a very creative thinker, always offering unique and divergent solutions to problems. He was not identified for his school's gifted program because his scores on I.Q. and achievement tests were low.

This story is not unusual for students from culturally diverse, low-income backgrounds who live in rural schools. Data from several research studies show that gifted and talented programs frequently underserve disadvantaged minority children. Our educational system often penalizes children who are raised with significantly different values and attitudes from those found in the dominant culture (Clark, 1988). This paper will focus on the Hispanic population since, as Chamber, Barron, and Sprecher (1980) pointed out, such students appear to be receiving the least support from the present assessment procedures. Problems will be explored relating to services provided for gifted children in rural schools, appropriate tools for identification, and social-emotional problems of this special population.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Masten (1985) says that an understanding of giftedness and bias are necessary in a discussion of assessment of gifted minority students. The United States Office of Education legislated the following definition of giftedness:

Gifted and talented are those identified by professionally qualified persons, who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by "regular school programs" in order to realize their contributions to self and society. These are children with "demonstrated" and/or "potential" high performance in the following areas: (a) general intellectual ability; (b) specific academic aptitude; (c) creative or productive thinking; (d) leadership ability; and (e) psychomotor ability.

This definition is widely used. As Richert (1985) says, there are several advantages to using the federal definition. It does have the legitimacy of national law behind it. It is also comprehensive in order to be applicable in many settings.

In the literature on the assessment of gifted minorities, the term "bias" is frequently used, but rarely defined. Masten (1985) identifies these two accepted definitions of bias:

- (1) Constant or systematic error as opposed to chance error.
- (2) In mathematical statistics, bias refers to a systematic under- or over-estimation of a population parameter by a statistic based upon samples drawn from the population.

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Areas of potential bias as summarized by Reynolds (1982) include inappropriate test content, inappropriate standardization samples, examiner and language bias, inequitable social consequences, measurement of different constructs, and differential predictive validity. Attempts to deal with perceived test bias produce supposedly "culture-fair" and "culture-free" tests. Culture fair tests do not exist because culture influences all environmental contacts and, therefore, test performance. Because tests favor individuals from the same culture in which they were developed, there are no culture-free tests either (Anastasi, 1982).

Sisk (1987) clarifies other important terms mentioned in this paper. "Culturally diverse" means that students are members of a culture significantly different in values, attitudes, and practices from the majority culture. Sometimes these children are also disadvantaged, which means being poor or being a member of the lower socioeconomic classes.

PROBLEM IN PERSPECTIVE

The United States takes pride in having a great variety of nationalities, ethnic, and racial groups. Our laws ensure the equality of these groups. However, many of these people are thought of as inferior, when actually they are only different. We have a long way to go in meeting the needs of these groups. Although several studies have examined the educational needs of Hispanic children, few have focused on the distinctive issue of Hispanic performance on rural communities (Hampton, Ekboir, Rochin, 1995). Since two-thirds of America's school districts and one third of the nation's children are rural (Helge, 1992), this population deserves to be examined.

Richert (1985) says that while most states formally subscribe to the comprehensive federal definition of giftedness, in practice, local districts tend to seek and find white, middle-class academic achievers. Figures published by the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights in 1972 revealed that minority groups are under-represented by 30-70% in gifted programs throughout the nation (and over-represented by 40-50% in special education programs). Underachieving, poor and minority gifted children who most need programs to develop their potential are consistently under-represented. Exum and Colangelo (1986) explain that gifted students of culturally diverse backgrounds do have meaningfully different needs from other gifted youngsters. If these needs are not recognized, then appropriate educational programming is seriously hampered. Van Tassell-Baska and Willis (1987) state that needs of minority and economically deprived students have been sorely neglected in American schools. Bruch (1978) analyzed the literature on special programs for minority gifted populations by ethnic group and found only eighteen programs in the United States operative prior to high school. In rural communities, the problem is only compounded. Rochin and Castillo (cited in Hampton, Ekboir, & Rochin, 1995) documented several demographic transformations sweeping rural communities. The Hispanic population grew in absolute and relative terms. The Hispanic presence ranged from less than 1% to 23% of population in 1950 and from 15% to 98% in these same communities in 1980. In 1980, 49 of these communities had a majority of Hispanics. By 1990, 68 of these communities contained majority Hispanic population. With this population growing at such a rate, schools need to examine how they identify such students for their gifted and talented programs.

IDENTIFICATION

Baldwin (1985) believes that one perspective on the problems associated with identifying and nurturing minority gifted children is that the research and literature on minorities has been focused more on deficits than on strengths. He also admits that identifying gifted children from minority groups has posed one of the most challenging problems in the education of the gifted. As larger public schools

across the country have geared up to accept the challenge of providing services to these students, they have often developed solutions that are impossible or impractical for rural areas to adopt.

In 1982, the National Report on Identification (Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982) revealed a great deal of confusion about defining, identifying, and determining which populations should be served in gifted programs. Some of the problems cited in the report follow:

1. There is confusion about the definition of giftedness because of its vagueness.
2. Educational equity is being violated in the identification of significant subpopulations. Tests are used for populations for which they have not been normed. Various minority groups are excluded systematically from gifted programs as a result of biased procedures.
3. Identification instruments are being misused. Tests are being used to measure abilities which they are not designed to determine. For example, achievement, aptitude, and I.Q. tests are used almost interchangeably, thereby confusing specific aptitudes and general intellectual ability. Achievement measures and I.Q. tests are also being used inappropriately to identify creativity and leadership.
4. Instruments and procedures are being used at inappropriate stages of the identification process. Diagnosis is not the purpose of initial screening procedures; however, use of these tests for screening is common. Such tests are useful only for considering placement in a particular course or measuring progress.

The controversy centers on whether I.Q. by itself can designate or identify giftedness, whether broader or diverse definitions of discrete abilities are more appropriate, or if characteristics beyond the cognitive are necessary or more relevant. Researchers also point out that most writers in the field of cognitive science as well as in the education of the gifted have been working to expand concepts of giftedness beyond I.Q., thereby, reducing one major gifted obstacle in identifying Hispanic students who live in rural schools. (Richert, 1987).

OBSTACLES TO IDENTIFICATION

deBernard (1985) points out that historically, Hispanic bilingual children in the United States have demonstrated a lower rate of achievement than their Anglo-American counterparts on English standardized reading tests. In many areas, these scores are used as a major criterion for placement in gifted programs. Children who speak little or no English, naturally, cannot do well on these tests; however, the most intriguing problem concerns the reading achievement of those Hispanic children who demonstrate well-developed English vocabularies and often impress teachers with their ability to translate instructions to new arrivals. Mace-Matluck and Dominguez (1981) found that these same children who are apparently proficient in English and often far above average in classroom performance, score lower than expected on reading tests.

Although such concerns have encompassed all schools, less attention has been paid to the problems of providing quality educational services to rural students than to urban students. This urban-rural imbalance has occurred despite data suggesting that rural students are more at risk for academic and behavioral problems than urban and suburban students (Helge cited in Huebner & Wise, 1992).

Bernal (1981) also sees that bilingual students have to work harder and perform better than their majority peers in order to reach approximate performance levels. Gallagher (1985) says that performance on an I.Q. test is determined, to some extent, by past opportunity and experience. Diaz

(1998) found that absence of early experiences thwarts students' possibilities of developing high abilities later in life. This is what makes it difficult to use I.Q. information in evaluating the intellectual capabilities of the youngsters who come from different home and cultural backgrounds. Baldwin (1985) lists the main factors affecting our success in identifying gifted minority children.

1. Parents who cannot speak English and thus cannot converse with their children may be unable to foster English language skills.
2. A lack of conversation in the home may deny children the opportunity to learn the art of dialogue.
3. Cultural attitudes that emphasize having respect for elders may make minority children appear to be cowardly and backward.
4. The traditions of the minority group may supersede the commonly accepted practices of the majority, leading to misconceptions about the abilities of children.
5. An environment that is focused on survival may force children to accept mature responsibilities in order to satisfy immediate needs rather than to pursue education.
6. Standard, out of school experiences such as visiting museums, libraries, and zoos may be limited for minorities.
7. Prejudices against minorities that may exist in the community may have a negative effect upon minority members' self-concepts.
8. Minority children's use of their native language, which may be rich in imagery, may interfere with their learning the precise vocabulary of standard school language.

Bernal (1981) states that even when home and school share the same values, gifted and talented bilingual students may not readily gain recognition, leading to identification and nurturance by the public schools, for they must overcome language as well as cultural barriers before they may demonstrate high intellectual potentials and specific academic aptitudes.

DeLeon and Argus-Calvo (1997) provide evidence to support that although giftedness can manifest itself in many ways, few gifted programs have been established in nonacademic areas, especially in rural settings. They feel that education in other areas is not only intrinsically valuable but also supports student persistence and achievement. The difficulty for meeting needs of gifted Hispanic students in rural schools lies mainly in finding appropriate tools for identification.

APPROPRIATE TOOLS FOR IDENTIFICATION

Richert (1987) and DeLeon et. al. (1997) suggest a variety of practices for ensuring that the disadvantaged culturally gifted have increased access to the services they need. Several practices are useful at more than one stage of identification: nomination into a pool by teacher, parent, or self, assessment for placement in a specific program option, evaluation of identification once students are placed in a program option. Richert (1985) and other researchers believe that identification procedures must reflect current research and eliminate inequity by using a multidimensional approach to identification (Hartley & Wasson, 1989). Giftedness has many dimensions: abilities, personality factors, and environment. In assessing abilities, it is essential to understand that each instrument or procedure measures only one of many facets. Measures that go beyond academic achievement must be used to find students whose abilities are not indicated by tests and school performance. Informal and formal data must be used. Richert (1985) says both formal and informal procedures are necessary to avoid test bias and to include all gifted students in need of special programming.

Masten (1985) believes that gifted assessment needs to be a continuous process and not limited to a single test administration. He identifies some research-based approaches to identify gifted minority students. For Hispanic children, researchers advise using the WISC, Cartoon Conservation Scale, Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, and the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (Masten, 1985, Spiker & Aamidor, 1996).

School districts have an option when using a test that has cultural bias. They can norm for each subpopulation. The procedure is to take the same percent top scoring students from each subpopulation as from among advantaged students so that representative numbers of disadvantaged and advantaged students are identified (Richert, 1985).

Baldwin (1985) suggests that recommendations of teachers and peers would be a good instrument with which to identify gifted minority students. Interviews would also be helpful. A product portfolio would be another informal kind of tool to use for identification. This would include the child's special projects that could be rated on a creativity scale. Educational adaptations made in an ongoing manner are feasible modifications for teachers in rural schools to make.

EDUCATIONAL ADAPTATIONS FOR THE GIFTED HISPANIC STUDENT

Gallagher (1985) says the important issue for educators is how to make meaningful adaptations for culturally diverse gifted students. Three major types of adaptations have been suggested: counseling, the building of self-knowledge, and the development of some meaningful curriculum adaptations.

Students caught between competing cultures need special attention. Culturally diverse students are caught between the need to express their talents and the need to adhere to family patterns and values. It is strongly suggested that counselors become immersed in and familiar with the cultural background and values of minority groups to help them deal with this problem.

One of the dimensions that gifted children from culturally diverse backgrounds share with one another is a degree of discomfort with the use of verbal symbols. Therefore, specialized programmatic efforts need to be designed with that understanding in mind. Expression of feelings through theater and related arts works well.

There are a number of opportunities for some minor changes in existing curricula which could make the material more relevant and interesting to the culturally diverse student. Development of curricula and teaching strategies that facilitate the sharing of cultural or racial experiences with children from other backgrounds could emphasize the importance of each group.

Colangelo and Zaffrann (1979) have made these suggestions for parents, counselors, and teachers who wish to work successfully with culturally diverse gifted learners:

1. Use mentors to tutor culturally diverse students.
2. Help them to develop questioning attitudes.
3. Help them understand and explore the problems they may face as they try to align their cultural values with those of the dominant culture and as they try to develop their own individuality.
4. Help them cope with peer pressures not to succeed, when they exist.
5. Help them to remediate any areas of skill that are lacking.
6. Give them opportunities to explore a variety of career options.

CONCLUSIONS

Many culturally disadvantaged Hispanic students in rural communities can be or are gifted. If we will give them a chance to achieve and believe in themselves, they may someday make great contributions to our society. They can only do this if we adequately identify and service their areas of giftedness. Data indicates that not enough Hispanic children in rural or urban areas are being identified for gifted programs. This should raise questions in our minds as to the accuracy of the tests we are using for placing children in these programs. We must be concerned that educational opportunities are provided to all students. After all, the United States boasts that we are a "melting pot." The question this paper proposes with regard to that statement is, "Are we trying to actually melt children so only the elite fit into our nice neat 'pot'?"

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