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# Promising Practices for Improving Identification of English Learners for Gifted and Talented Programs

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**Abstract**

The underrepresentation of English learners (ELs) in gifted and talented programs is a societal and research problem that merits investigation. Three state departments of education and their state directors of gifted programs supported our access to 16 schools across nine districts. In these three states with gifted identification and programming mandates, ELs were proportionally represented in gifted and talented programs in the 16 schools we visited. Interview data from 225 participants revealed four themes: adopting universal screening procedures, creating alternative pathways to identification, establishing a web of communication, and using professional learning as a lever for change.

**Keywords**

underrepresentation, bilingual, gifted students, identification of gifted children, gifted learners

America's demography is changing. English learners (ELs) are the fastest growing population of students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Sparks, 2016; Wiggin, 2017). According to McFarland et al. (2019), the

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percentage of ELs in Fall 2016 was 9.6%, which represents an increase from 8.1% in Fall 2000. The size of the EL population is even more evident in the percentage of kindergarten students, which was 16.7% in 2014–2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). However, despite the growing number of ELs overall, their representation in gifted programming continues to lag behind not only populations of advantaged communities (Callahan, 2005) but also other underserved populations of students (Matthews, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2014) reported that in the 2011–2012 school year just 2% of ELs were enrolled in gifted and talented programs compared with 7% of non-ELs.

Therefore, it is important to study what challenges districts and schools face when identifying ELs for gifted programs. Equally important is the need to study what practices districts and schools that successfully identify proportional numbers of English learners for their gifted programs implement. This research study explores these issues.

## Background of the Study

According to data from the Education Commission of the States (2014), the definition of EL varies by state, as most create their own definitions; others either use the federal definition ($n = 4$) or have not yet chosen one to use ($n = 3$). The federal definition of an EL refers to students of ages 3 through 21 in elementary or secondary schools who were not born in the United States or whose native language is other than English. ELs may have difficulty meeting academic standards, succeeding in classes instructed in English, or participating fully in society (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, ESEA Section 8101(20)). Although issues of academic underperformance and high dropout rates among ELs have received greater attention in recent years (National Education Association, 2008), a lesser known area of concern is the systemic underrepresentation of ELs in gifted and talented programs due to identification practices and conceptions of giftedness (Connery et al., 2019; Subotnik et al., 2011).

### *Underrepresentation of ELs in Gifted and Talented Programs*

The underrepresentation of ELs in gifted and talented programs has been attributed to factors related to the identification instruments and practices used, as well as narrow conceptions of giftedness focusing on intelligence test scores (Kogan, 2001; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Variations in opportunities to learn due to systemic inequality in education must also be taken into consideration when evaluating scores on ability and achievement tests that assume some similar background experiences for a given group of students (Worrell, 2014).

For ELs, specific language demands of tests confound scores on ability and achievement tests (Peters & Engerrand, 2016). Many researchers suggest ELs may not perform as well on assessments with verbal components in English due to linguistic and cultural factors (Bernal, 2002; de Bernard & Hofstra, 1985; Esquierdo, Arreguin-Anderson, 2012; Ford et al., 2008; Gonzalez, 1974; Harris et al., 2007, 2009; Melesky,

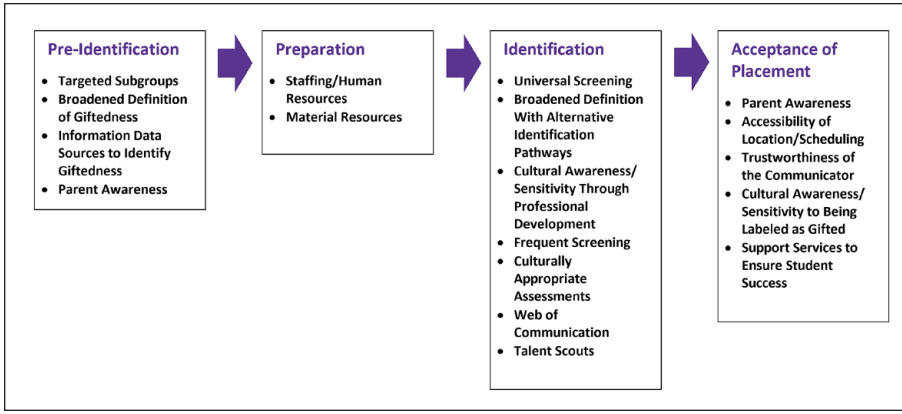


**Figure 1.** Four phases for improving identification of ELs for gifted and talented program.
*Note.* EL = English learners.

1985). Limited English skills can preclude English learners from fully understanding the information being requested on standardized tests and also limits their ability to fully express their knowledge. The cultural experiences of ELs may also differ from those of the majority culture upon which test developers build assessments.

Typically, assessments are only available in English, which prevent ELs from documenting their full range of abilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition (2019), as of the 2016–2017 school year, Spanish was the first language of 76% of ELs, while approximately 50 languages appear in one or more states' top five list of languages other than English spoken.

Siegle et al. (2016) studied literature on the underrepresentation of gifted and talented ELs in gifted programs and developed an EL Theory of Change. We posited the following stages: Pre-Identification, Preparation, Identification, and Acceptance of Placement (see Figure 1). Each stage describes special issues for ELs. Pre-Identification highlights the possibility that students may have had fewer opportunities to acquire background knowledge and academic skills necessary to be recognized as gifted. Informal screening would identify students who would benefit from an emergent talent experience. Preparation is the second stage addressing a special issue for ELs who may not have had the support to participate in preparation activities, which is a set of organized activities to develop English learners' knowledge and academic skills. The third stage is Identification, which emphasizes how gifted students from EL populations can exhibit giftedness in different ways or choose not to reveal their giftedness. Educators may not perceive the ability to function in at least two languages as an indicator of giftedness (Angelelli et al., 2002; Valdés, 2002). This stage involves selecting students to receive services beyond those offered in general education classrooms. The final stage of Acceptance of Placement is particularly important to ensure parents, guardians, or caretakers become familiar with program information, which must be communicated accurately and in a trustworthy manner. Parents, guardians, or

caretakers need information about accessibility of programing due to location, family obligations, timing, finances, or scheduling. The EL Theory of Change addresses education, culture, and language. English language acquisition is an important topic as testing, programming, and services are often only offered in English.

*Second language acquisition.* For decades, linguists and educational psychologists (Cummins, 2008; Dixon et al., 2012; Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Krashen & Terrell, 1995) studied second language acquisition. The progression from basic interpersonal communication skills to cognitive academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2008; Krashen & Terrell, 1995) is complex and time intensive. Reed and Railsback (2003) described five stages of second language acquisition:

- Stage 1: The Silent/Receptive or Preproduction Stage: students may respond using gestures or performance but may not speak;
- Stage 2: The Early Production Stage: students use short answers or phrases;
- Stage 3: The Speech/Emergence Stage: students use short sentences and ask and answer simple questions;
- Stage 4: The Intermediate Language Proficiency Stage: students use more complex sentences; add more details; and
- Stage 5: The Advanced Language Proficiency Stage: students use grammar and vocabulary comparable with age peers and participate in classroom activities; however, they may need some language support.

The number of stages in second language acquisition vary. Robertson and Ford (2019) agreed with the five stages, but chose to include Beginning Fluency as an additional stage after Stage 3: The Speech/Emergence Stage described above. In this stage, students are somewhat fluent in social situations; however, academic language is challenging.

Students who are emerging bilinguals may not be ready to demonstrate their cognitive knowledge and abilities as they are in the process of mastering the complexities of academic English versus conversational English (Hakuta et al., 2000; Reed & Railsback, 2003). Hakuta et al. (2000) noted that although students may master oral English proficiency in 3 to 5 years, it often takes 4 to 7 years for them to master academic English proficiency. Therefore, although ELs may appear proficient in English, their English is not sufficiently developed for them to fully demonstrate their academic potential in English (Dixon et al., 2012). Collier and Thomas (2017) suggested learning academic English may be delayed if students do not have a solid base in their first language. They noted that without an opportunity to develop a solid base in their first language, many students never reach grade-level achievement. According to the International Literacy Association (2019), "When English learners continue to develop cognitively in their first language until at least age 12, they achieve on or above grade level in school" (p. 5).

Students may be reluctant to participate in discussion groups or pose questions to other students or teachers because their oral academic English is not fluent or grammar rules are still being learned and applied. If teacher nomination/referral is the first

requirement in a gifted and talented identification system, students with developing English skills may not be recognized, which could result in a "large proportion of gifted students being missed" (McBee et al., 2016, p. 258).

*Narrow conceptions of giftedness.* Wiggin (2017) asserted that the reliance on narrow conceptions of giftedness held by people involved in screening, nominating/referring, identifying, and placing students in gifted programs and services and the human decision-making processes present an additional barrier. Fernández and Abe (2018) affirmed that "cultural variables exert a powerful effect on test performance" (para. 1). With reliance on narrow conceptions of giftedness and intelligence test scores and cultural biases within tests (Carpenter, 2019; Fernández & Abe, 2018; Yaafouri, 2019), ELs will be overlooked. For example, Oklahoma has gifted education identification and programming mandates. This state's definition of gifted and talented children clarifies that "'demonstrated abilities of high performance capability' means those identified students who score in the top 3% on any standardized test of intellectual ability" (Davidson Gifted Education Database–State Gifted Education Policies, n.d.). In addition, McClain and Pfeiffer (2012) found that 45 states include intelligence in their definitions; 16 states require intelligence scores for the identification of gifted students.

The reality is identifying students for gifted programs and services in public schools is one of the most controversial and contested aspects of gifted and talented education because the process results in some students labeled as gifted while others are not (Borland, 2003; de Wet & Gubbins, 2011). This is particularly controversial when the students are from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) populations (Castellano & Díaz, 2002; Ford, 2014; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Ford & Whiting, 2008; Kitano, 2003; Plucker & Callahan, 2014; Worrell, 2014).

## *Stages in Identification Practices in Gifted and Talented Programs and Their Impact on ELs*

ELs are a heterogeneous group of students who exhibit a variety of gifts and talents. For these gifts and talents to flourish, they must be recognized and nurtured within schools and communities. This recognition requires a critical focus on understanding how gifted students are identified for programs and services and how the stages of the process influence whether ELs are appropriately identified or not identified for gifted services (Siegle et al., 2016).

It is important to understand that identifying gifted and talented students is often a multistage process reflecting state laws, regulations, and guidelines. To better understand identification as a multistage process, and to acknowledge that procedures associated with the identification process vary, it is helpful to define terms, such as screening, nomination/referral, identification, and placement, and to separate the components for explanatory purposes. Barriers at each stage can limit the number of EL students identified for gifted services.

*Screening.* Screening refers to a purposeful approach to discover students' gifts and talents. The spring of Grade 2 or Grade 3 is often the designated time for group administration of a reasoning and problem-solving test or a nonverbal ability test. Achievement tests are sometimes included as part of the screening process. The term *universal screening* is used when data are collected on all students at one or more grade levels.

Even if universal screening is used, English learners require more frequent screening due to their continual language development. Schools that limit screening to a single early grade will overlook ELs whose English academic proficiently has not yet fully developed (Conger, 2009; Hakuta et al., 2000; Thompson, 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). In addition, although some screening instruments are available in Spanish, dialect variation of students from many different countries may restrict the appropriateness of these tests for local students. It is also important to note the availability of instruments in other languages is limited.

*Nomination/referral.* Nomination/referral involves naming students to be considered for gifted services. This includes collecting informal or formal data about students who perform above grade level or demonstrate potential strengths and abilities. Respondents include administrators; district gifted coordinators; gifted specialists; classroom teachers; parents, guardians, or caretakers; students; or community members. One example of an informal process involves requesting student names based on state or local definitions of giftedness. Formal processes may include disseminating a list of behavioral characteristics to guide the respondents' ratings or requesting completion of standardized nomination/referral or rating scales consisting of close-ended items. Responses to open-ended items may require the inclusion of real-life examples of behavioral characteristics associated with gifted and talented students.

Teachers make most nominations/referrals (McBee, 2006) and deficit thinking biases prevail (Ford & Whiting, 2008). Unfortunately, many teachers have not received training in how giftedness manifests differently across cultures. Without training, teachers often overlook students from underserved populations (Coleman & Shah-Coltrane, 2011).

Many of the student nomination/referral checklists used by teachers tend to favor students from the dominant culture. Up to one quarter of the items on commonly used teacher checklists include behavior skills not necessarily related to academic giftedness (Brice & Brice, 2004). Locally developed teacher, parent, and student nomination/referral checklists often have limited reliability and validity evidence because practitioners' adherence to a formal instrument development processes is typically not followed (McBee et al., 2016; McCoach et al., 2013).

*Identification.* Identification may involve one or more of the following approaches:

1. The first approach is reviewing existing student data from formal and informal sources and determining eligibility and need for programming.
2. The second approach includes administering the full test battery. Depending on the test, district gifted coordinators, gifted specialists, classroom teachers, school psychologists, or counselors conduct the assessment.

3. The third approach includes requesting parent permission for the administration of an individual intelligence test by a school psychologist. Resulting data are then presented to the decision-making team and parents, guardians, or caretakers.

In addition to the limitations associated with testing ELs previously described, the composition of the group responsible for ultimately selecting students for the gifted program can be limiting when EL affiliated stakeholders are not included. Input from EL specialists, teachers, and aides who work directly with ELs, and ELs' parents, guardians, or caretakers are needed to develop a complete picture of an EL's talent potential.

*Placement.* Placement is the final component of the process when decisions are made about the students' status as meeting the qualifications and demonstrating a need for programs and services, not meeting the qualifications, or requiring further testing or consideration.

Gifted and talented students from EL populations may need to continue receiving support to develop their academic English skills even while they are in the gifted program. Depending on the location of programs and services, students may also need to change classrooms or leave their home school to be involved in the gifted program.

Parents, guardians, or caretakers may have concerns about consenting to assessments or placement due to family circumstances or immigration status. In addition, concerns over minority student participation in gifted programs include (a) isolation that results from being one of a very few from a subpopulation identified and served through a particular service delivery model, particularly if joining the served group requires separation from peers; (b) curriculum that is not relevant to the students; (c) instructional practices based on competition or on methods of instruction that are culturally mismatched to the learning practices of the students' communities; (d) the inattention to social relationship building; and (e) emotional distress that may come from the feelings of responsibility or the stress of representing a particular group (Moore et al., 2005).

## Statement of the Problem

Each of the steps of screening, nomination/referral, identification, and placement presents barriers to gifted identification for ELs that schools need to address. Bernal (2002) was adamant about the need to gather data about successful identification approaches. He argued that "*no meaningful changes in the identification process will take place in very traditional middle-class GT programs unless good data can be used to justify the outcomes of an alternative selection system*" (p. 85, italics in original). Therefore, it is important to design and implement a study about what works in identifying gifted and talented ELs.

## Research Questions

We posed the following research questions to increase our understanding of successful practices in identifying English learners for gifted programs:

**Research Question 1:** What procedures, practices, and instruments are used to assess and identify ELs for gifted and talented programs?
**Research Question 2:** What are the roles of district and school personnel involved in the assessment and identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs?
**Research Question 3:** What challenges do districts and schools encounter in the assessment and identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs?

## Method

### *Research Design*

To address our research questions focusing on procedures and practices used to identify ELs for gifted and talented programs, we implemented a basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach emphasizes the importance of constructing meaning from educators' knowledge, experiences, and practices related to identification procedures and practices. We analyzed interview and focus group data to determine themes based on participants' comments and reflections.

Research team members had direct or course-based experience in identifying gifted and talented students from diverse cultural, language, and economic communities. As they served as the instruments of the analyses, it was important to prepare reflexivity statements prior to data analyses and to share and review emergent themes and findings. The reflexivity statements outlined potential areas of researcher bias that had to be reviewed and discussed as data were analyzed and summarized.

### *Selection of Schools*

We selected three states with mandates to identify and serve gifted students that were also willing to share student data with us. They provided us with all students' reading and mathematics academic achievement outcomes across Grades 3 to 5 and student demographics, that is, race/ethnicity, free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) status, gifted status, the school students attended, and grade level. From this data set, we chose schools and districts where ELs were proportionally represented in their gifted and talented programs (i.e., the proportion of ELs among gifted students matched the proportion of ELs in the general population).

To select schools, we conducted analyses using a school-level data file containing counts of students who were ever classified as EL (Ever EL), students identified as gifted by Grade 5, and students classified as both gifted and Ever EL for the Grade 5 data within the school. We identified students as Ever EL if they were currently or formerly classified as EL by Grade 5. Our school-level data file included the actual proportion of gifted ELs in the school.

To estimate the expected proportion of gifted ELs in the school, we computed the product of the gifted and the Ever EL variables. We then created a variable called the proportionality ratio (or RATIO). The proportionality ratio represented the actual proportion of gifted ELs being identified in the school divided by the expected proportion

of gifted ELs, given the proportion of gifted and talented students and the proportion of ELs in the school. A value of 1 indicated the ELs were proportionately represented in the gifted and talented programs—there were as many gifted ELs as would be expected based on the number of gifted and talented students and the number of ELs in the school. A value less than 1 indicated ELs were underrepresented and a value greater than 1 indicated ELs were better represented than would be expected. We used .90 as our cutoff for proportional representation. In other words, the actual proportion of GT/ELs had to be at least 90% of the expected proportion for us to consider the school as "proportionally identifying GT/ELs."

Because the denominator of the equation becomes very small when there are either relatively few ELs in a school or relatively few gifted and talented students in a school, it would be a mistake to assume that higher proportionality ratios are always better. Ratios of approximately 1 or more are good, and ratios closer to zero are certainly worse than larger ratios. However, some schools with very few gifted or very few ELs end up with computed ratios well above 1. Therefore, rather than simply taking the schools with the highest ratios as our schools of interest, we generated inclusion criteria:

- at least 3 GT/ELs in the cohort,
- at least 10 students in the cohort,
- the proportionality ratio for Gifted EL was $\geq .90$, and
- the proportion of Ever EL students was at least .10.

Our rationale for these criteria was that there needed to be a nonnegligible number of ELs identified as gifted from EL populations. A five-member advisory board consisting of EL and gifted experts reviewed our inclusion criteria. Using these criteria, we selected three districts in each of the three states. Across the three districts we visited 16 schools that were proportionately identifying ELs for their gifted program.

## *School Demographics*

The school populations varied from 384 to 1,747 students. Of these schools, the types of communities included city schools ($n = 8$), rural ($n = 2$), and suburban ($n = 6$). More than 90% of the student population qualified for FRPL in seven schools, 80% to 89% in three schools, and 50% to 76% in six schools. In addition, 15 (94%) of the 16 schools were Title I schools (see Table 1).

## *Instrumentation*

The overarching study question focused on identification procedures and practices used in districts and schools successfully identifying ELs for gifted and talented programs. Based on literature reviews and our theory of change (Mun et al., 2016, 2020; Siegle et al., 2016), we identified four cross-cutting themes and professional experiences: patterns, processes, personnel, and problems. The initial grand tour questions for each participant group followed the same organizational structure:

**Table 1.** EL School Demographics by Type of Community and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch.

| School code | State/ location | Type of community | No. of students | Free or reduced-price lunch (%) | Title I school |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1-1-A | SE | City | 647 | 99.5 | Yes |
| 1-1-B | SE | Suburban | 551 | 99.5 | Yes |
| 1-2-A | SE | Rural | 548 | 76.3 | Yes |
| 1-3-A | SE | Suburban | 660 | 97.9 | Yes |
| 1-3-B | SE | City | 384 | 99.2 | Yes |
| 2-1-A | MW | City | 480 | 96.7 | Yes |
| 2-1-B | MW | City | 795 | 94.1 | Yes |
| 2-2-A | MW | City | 401 | 50.1 | Yes |
| 2-2-B | MW | City | 1,747 | 74.2 | No |
| 2-3-A | MW | Suburban | 576 | 88.5 | Yes |
| 3-1-A | S | Rural | 994 | 99.7 | Yes |
| 3-1-B | S | Suburban | 1,252 | 64.8 | Yes |
| 3-2-A | S | City | 563 | 82.1 | Yes |
| 3-2-B | S | City | 514 | 61.5 | Yes |
| 3-3-A | S | Suburban | 828 | 57.4 | Yes |
| 3-3-B | S | Suburban | 638 | 85.4 | Yes |

*Note.* Three states, nine districts, and 16 schools. EL = English learners; MW = Midwest; S = South; SE = Southeast.

**Question 1:** Gifted education defined: Will you please walk me through how your school thinks about the identification of gifted students?
**Question 2:** Gifted education process: Will you please walk me through how your school assesses and identifies students for gifted programming?
**Question 3:** Gifted education personnel: Who is involved in the assessment and identification of student for gifted programming?
**Question 4:** Gifted education problems: What do you perceive as your biggest challenges to assessing English learners for gifted programming?

As we asked questions related to the grand tour questions, we repeated a key question: Does this process vary at all for ELs? If so, in what way? The entire set of interview and focus group questions for each participant group is available on the National Center for Research on Gifted Education website (https://ncrge.uconn.edu).

## *Data Collection*

We conducted 1-day visits to 16 schools (14 elementary and two middle schools). A two-member research team spent 1 day at each school to collect interview and focus group data, along with specific school documents. We interviewed key persons ($N = 225$) knowledgeable about current identification practices, including administrators ($n = 30$); district gifted coordinators ($n = 15$); gifted specialists

($n$ = 25); classroom teachers ($n$ = 75); parents, legal guardians, or caretakers ($n$ = 71); and school psychologists or counselors ($n$ = 9). Some of the same participants were also part of identification committee interviews. We analyzed comments from these 225 key persons, which yielded 84 transcripts, to address the research questions.

## Data Analysis

Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) and Corbin and Strauss's (2008) stages of open, axial, and selective coding, we analyzed 84 transcripts from 225 interviewees, seeking one or more core categories or themes that explained what "this research would be all about" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 146).

We created an EL codebook based on our theory of change (Mun et al., 2016; Siegle et al., 2016). The theory of change includes four phases related to the identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs: Pre-Identification, Preparation, Identification, and Acceptance of Placement. The EL codebook, which is available upon request, included two Parent Codes: Screening, Nomination/Referral, Identification, and Placement (with five Child Codes; 39 Grandchild Codes) and Infrastructure and Resources (with four Child Codes; 31 Grandchild Codes). Table 2 provides sample EL codebook entries. The level of specificity for the codes, definitions, sample transcript texts, and exclusion criteria ensured that qualitative research team members had guidance throughout the coding process.

We conducted training on using the EL codebook and working with Dedoose, computer-assisted data analysis software, with six qualitative research team members; four of these team members conducted site group and individual interviews. All qualitative team members had teaching background and quantitative and qualitative research experiences in schools. Four team members hold doctorates in educational psychology, with three of these team members having a specialization in gifted and talented education. Two members hold master's degrees in educational psychology with a specialization in gifted and talented education.

The process of coding 84 transcripts included multiple steps. Team members assigned codes on paper, compared the results of codes, discussed terminology, and updated code definitions (Saldaña, 2013). This was followed by coding sample sections of transcripts using Dedoose. Throughout the process of coding transcripts, we met 2 hr per week for 3 months of the coding process to share concerns regarding the consistency of code application and to discuss potential patterns and themes. This was a critical part of our process for multiple reasons, even beyond typical concerns regarding reliability. First, two of our researchers who were coding transcripts were not present at the visits themselves, so ensuring consistent coding necessitated an opportunity to clarify contexts. In the end, having these external eyes complete the coding, along with support via weekly meetings and ongoing check-ins, added great supports to the consistency of coding. Next, because the visits took place over an extended period of time, we believed there needed to be routine calibration efforts, particularly at the beginning of the process. As part of this effort, we selected a subset of transcripts to

**Table 2.** Sample Codebook Descriptors.

| Code | Level<br>0 = Parent<br>1 = Child<br>2 = Grandchild | Definition | Sample Text | Exclusion criteria |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PL gifted and talented teachers | 2 | Responsible for working with identified gifted and talented students in various service delivery models and engaging in professional learning opportunities related to educating gifted and talented students | "They have professional learning communities because she has the biggest group of [gt] teachers so they break up into smaller groups and do that, and then they talk about what's working and what's not, you know. But what works at one school doesn't necessarily work at the other." | Do not use this code for individuals *providing* the PL, only for *receiving* the PL. Providing PL should be coded as a role and responsibility for the provider under human resources (above). |
| PL general education classrooms | 2 | Responsible for working with identified gifted and talented students in general education classroom and engaging in professional learning opportunities related to educating gifted and talented students | "They actually invite the cluster teachers to come after school for 2 ½ hours and they rotate through rigorous activities that you can do with gifted students, and so I'm thinking that at the elementary level we're going to have to get back to doing some things like that, but it would totally be on an 'if you want to come' and we can't require that, so." | Do not use this code for individuals *providing* the PL, only for *receiving* the PL. Providing PL should be coded as a role and responsibility for the provider under human resources (above). |
| PL gifted and talented coordinator | 2 | Responsible for overseeing all aspects of the gifted and talented programs and services and engaging in professional learning opportunities related to educating gifted and talented students | "I'm also a lead for the State so I get to . . . hear it all firsthand and then I get to learn from other LEAs and then I bring that back and we figure out how we can incorporate that with what we're doing." | Do not use this code for individuals *providing* the PL, only for *receiving* the PL. Providing PL should be coded as a role and responsibility for the provider under human resources (above). |

*Note.* PL = professional learning.

check intercoder agreement, which "requires that two or more coders are able to reconcile through discussion whatever coding discrepancies they may have for the same unit of text" (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 297). As we discussed coding results and coding discrepancies, we revisited the codebook, clarified interpretations of definitions, and added more examples of text from transcripts that reflected definitions. The coding of the 84 transcripts yielded 2,207 excerpts; 6,278 total code applications; 208 total axial codes; and four selective codes or themes.

Interview and focus group participants shared specific identification procedures, practices, and instruments. Research team members reviewed participants' descriptions of the identification process, listed the tools, and classified them based on three categories: Cognitive Ability/Intelligence Tests, Achievement Tests, and Rating Scales. We calculated the frequencies of the identification tools by the number of schools by state and across schools (see Table 3).

## Results

### *Procedures, Practices, and Instruments*

In our study, nine districts within the three states used cognitive ability and achievement tests as part of the identification process. Table 3 lists specific cognitive ability/intelligence tests and achievement tests used by schools. Districts also used locally developed teacher ($n = 8$), parent ($n = 6$), and student rating scales ($n = 5$) more often than published instruments, which raises questions about the reliability, validity, and research-based evidence about characteristics of gifted students.

Procedures and practices for identifying ELs for gifted programs varied across states, but included similar basic components. In these three states, several districts and schools used universal screening ($n = 9$ districts, $n = 14$ schools), nonverbal assessments ($n = 9$ districts, $n = 12$ schools), cut scores ($n = 9$ districts, $n = 14$ schools), native language assessments ($n = 9$ districts, $n = 14$ schools), and talent pools ($n = 7$ districts, $n = 10$ schools) for promising students (see Table 4).

District-level identification procedures included a variety of instruments and tools to gather more student information. Advocacy, proactive searches for students of promise, and flexibility in applying criteria were important components of the process to ensure districts did not overlook students. The classification as gifted and talented was a decision based on evidence from multiple sources.

The gifted specialist in State 1, District 2 described how the district used assessments to increase access to the gifted and talented program:

> So, we give an aptitude test, an achievement test, and there is a group test, and once those come back, we look at that and if they've got a high aptitude score but not so high on the achievement then we can give them additional tests like Woodcock Johnson. If it's the other way around where achievement is high and aptitude is not, then we'll give them either the RIST [Reynolds Intellectual Screening Test] or the Raven's. (Gifted specialist interview, 1-2-A, April 19, 2016)

**Table 3.** Identification Tools by Number of Schools by State and Across Schools.

| | No. of schools by state | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tool name | 1 | 2 | 3 | Total | % |
| Cognitive ability/intelligence tests | | | | | |
| CogAT (Cognitive Abilities Test) | 5 | 4 | 0 | 9 | 56 |
| NNAT (Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test) | 2 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 50 |
| KBIT (Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test) | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 31 |
| OLSAT (Otis–Lennon School Ability Test) | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 25 |
| Bateria III Woodcock-Muñoz | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 19 |
| WISC (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children) | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 19 |
| Raven's Progressive Matrices | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 19 |
| RIAS (Reynolds Intellectual Assessment System) | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 13 |
| DAS (Differential Ability Scales) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| CTONI (Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| S-FRIT (Slosson Full-Range Intelligence Test) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| RIST (Reynolds Intellectual Screening Test) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| WPPSI (Wechsler Preschool Primary Scale of Intelligence) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| TOMAGS (Test of Mathematical Abilities for Gifted Students) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| KABC (Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| WISC (Wechsler Intelligence Scale) for Children–Spanish | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| UNIT (Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Achievement tests | | | | | |
| ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) | 3 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 44 |
| MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) | 0 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 25 |
| State Comprehensive Assessment Test | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 19 |
| PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| State End of Grade Tests | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| State Standards Assessment | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| District Assessment Test | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| Woodcock-Johnson Achievement Test | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| SAT (Stanford Achievement Test) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| Aprenda (SAT in Spanish) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| State Assessment Program | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |

*(continued)*

**Table 3. (continued)**

| Tool name | No. of schools by state | | | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | | |
| ACT (American College Test) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Aspire ACT | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| State Measures of Academic Success | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Star Reading and Math | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Logramos | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| iReady | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Rating scales | | | | | |
| Teacher rating | 0 | 2 | 6 | 8 | 50 |
| Parent rating | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 38 |
| Student rating | 0 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 31 |
| Gifted Behaviors Characteristics Checklist | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 25 |
| Slocumb-Payne Teacher Perception Inventory | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 19 |
| KOI (Kingore Observation Inventory) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| Creative Thinking | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| CAP (Creativity Assessment Packet) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| SIGS (Scales for Identifying Gifted Students) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| SRBCSS (Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| GES (Gifted Evaluation Scale) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| GRS (Gifted Rating Scales) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Administrator rating | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| TOPS (Teacher's Observation of Potential in Students) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |

In addition to standardized assessments, districts included performance assessments ($n = 7$ districts, $n = 9$ schools), such as portfolios and work samples, as a component for identification (see Table 4). For example, State 1, District 3 initiated a new practice to collect information for student portfolios, which it used to provide a more complete picture of a student's abilities. State 3, District 3 also used portfolios. The district gifted coordinator described the portfolio procedures:

> And the portfolio would be at least three products . . . people on a team who would independently look at those products. Then they get together. They come to consensus on the reading of those products that would demonstrate creativity, motivation, leadership and or advanced academics. And that can be used in place of the test scores. (District gifted coordinator interview, 3-3-A, June 1, 2016)

Despite the consistent use of standardized cognitive and achievement assessments along with performance assessments, variability in identification procedures occurred

**Table 4.** EL Gifted Identification Procedures and Practices.

| School code | Universal screening | Nonverbal assessments | Cut scores | Native language assessments | Talent pool | Performance assessment | Identification committee |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1-1-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| 1-1-B | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| 1-2-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| 1-3-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| 1-3-B | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | ● |
| 2-1-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| 2-1-B | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| 2-2-A | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | |
| 2-2-B | | | | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| 2-3-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| 3-1-A | ● | | ● | ● | | ● | ● |
| 3-1-B | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● |
| 3-2-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| 3-2-B | | | ● | ● | | ● | ● |
| 3-3-A | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● |
| 3-3-B | ● | ● | | ● | | | ● |
| Total schools | 14 | 12 | 14 | 14 | 10 | 9 | 15 |

*Note*. Three states, nine districts, and 16 schools. EL = English learners.

across states and districts most often when practices specific to the identification of ELs were involved. In State 1, District 3, a member of the identification team commented on the use of multiple measures:

> We look at the teacher's recommendation as well; we look at several different test batteries with the classwork and observation, so we try and compile a lot of different things to get the whole picture of the child, so it's not just test scores or it's not just this or that, to try and really widen that scope of who are identified. (Identification committee focus group, 1-3-B, September 15, 2016)

Gifted specialists also expressed how they approached their search for students with gifts and talents who may not have full command of English. One specialist in State 2, District 2 described the "hunt" for students with high potential.

> Maybe having someone that's in a position that my job is to be on the hunt—kind of at all times, so knowing the scores of my students at my school and being the one that says, "Wait a minute, this person got 99% on the nonverbal; . . . might have gotten 30% on the verbal scores on the CogAT [Cognitive Ability Test] or the quantitative scores, but look at the nonverbal." So, we've got a language barrier here but they're obviously able to think at a higher level, so let's start getting the data. (Gifted specialist focus group, 2-2-A, May 11, 2016)

### *Roles of District and School Personnel*

District gifted coordinators and/or gifted specialists were centrally involved in the assessment and identification process, both within and outside of the classroom. They generally had or were working on earning gifted education endorsements or degrees in gifted and talented education. The three states mandate that teachers who work with gifted students require state endorsements. Gifted specialists were frequently responsible for providing informal training to classroom teachers, which was important as classroom teachers often made the initial nomination/referral for assessment. After this initial nomination/referral step, these classroom teachers were often not part of the process.

Schools with identification committees ($n = 15$) generally attempted to include gifted education staff, school psychologists or counselors, administrators, and classroom teachers on the committee (see Table 4). There was also mention of using an interpreter/translator during assessment, as needed, in at least one school.

To ensure accountability, district personnel were involved in the process as well. In cases where schools did not have an identification committee, the gifted specialist or district gifted coordinator was generally the person who ultimately made the final identification determination. In general, the same personnel were responsible for assessing and identifying both ELs and non-ELs. Some schools made an effort to ensure their identification committees were as diverse as possible. Personnel involved in identifying ELs for gifted programs had knowledge of the characteristics of gifted and talented students; understood the importance of assembling a group of educators from various roles, backgrounds, and responsibilities; and sought alternative measures when possible to make informed decisions.

School personnel made some effort to provide all educators with professional learning on assessing, identifying, and serving ELs specifically. Personnel at five schools discussed professional learning opportunities about gifted ELs, some of which took place outside of the academic school year. Personnel at another five schools mentioned this as a goal for the future (see Table 5). Professional learning in these areas was more common for gifted specialists, school psychologists or counselors, and EL educators. Often these professional learning opportunities were targeted toward one specific group of personnel at a time. For example, one school offered identification training for gifted specialists focused on recognizing biases related to gifted identification. Several schools offered professional learning opportunities that included people from different specialty areas to collaborate. Guidance counselors and bilingual psychologists participated in meetings with the district gifted coordinator or gifted specialists.

When professional learning occurred, it was most often on an informal, just-in-time basis. Spreading this professional learning to the entire school community was not always a priority. However, outcomes observed in one school suggested that formal, collaborative professional learning between English Language Acquisition and gifted specialists may result in substantial increases in EL identification for gifted education programs. As one district gifted coordinator stated, “We walked into that room and

**Table 5.** PL Opportunities Related to Identifying EL Gifted Students.

| School code | PL on gifted EL students | PL on gifted EL students Goal | PL communications between EL and gifted departments | PL for parents. guardians, or caretakers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1-1-A | | | ● | |
| 1-1-B | | ● | | |
| 1-2-A | | ● | | ● |
| 1-3-A | | | | ● |
| 1-3-B | | ● | | |
| 2-1-A | | ● | | |
| 2-1-B | | | ● | |
| 2-2-A | | | ● | ● |
| 2-2-B | | ● | | |
| 2-3-A | ● | | | |
| 3-1-A | | | | |
| 3-1-B | ● | | | |
| 3-2-A | ● | | | |
| 3-2-B | ● | | | |
| 3-3-A | ● | | | |
| 3-3-B | | | ● | |
| Total | 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 |

*Note.* Three states, nine districts, and 16 schools. PL = professional learning; EL = English learners.

four children in our entire district were identified as gifted ELs . . . We left that room with 45 students ready to identify" (District gifted coordinator interview, 2-2-A, May 11, 2016).

Professional learning related to identifying ELs for gifted and talented programs was not a requirement for all administrators and teachers. Systematic, ongoing district-level professional learning plans for administrators and teachers make a difference. Interview participants shared various strategies to inform educators and the community at large about identification procedures, practices, and instruments. They also shared assessment and identification challenges they still face.

## *Challenges in Assessing and Identifying ELs for Gifted and Talented Programs*

As stated previously, the identification process can be divided into four components: screening, nomination/referral, identification, and placement. Each component presents different challenges related to identifying gifted ELs. Interview participants described the challenges in this process, shared potentially beneficial strategies, and noted suggestions for additional interventions and strategies.

The goal of this first component of the system was to determine which students should be evaluated for gifted services. The major challenge in this component was a general hesitation by teachers; parents, guardians, or caretakers; and other

stakeholders in referring ELs for evaluation. This hesitation can delay or outright prevent the identification of ELs as gifted and talented and may be found at all grade levels and across students with any native language other than English. The problem diminished as students gained English language mastery. This may be related to the focus on English language acquisition and literacy in elementary education. In the words of a gifted program coordinator: "Sometimes teachers are quick to dismiss those kids because of the language barrier, like they don't recognize it because they're so focused on them learning their lack of knowing the language that maybe they don't recognize the other areas" (District gifted coordinator, 1-1-A, March 8, 2016).

As noted earlier, 14 of the 16 schools used some form of universal screening, most often an ability test such as the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) or the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT). Two schools used achievement test data as their universal screening tool. Universal screening appeared to be a successful strategy at our subject schools, but many of them acknowledged that it could not entirely mitigate screening challenges.

The third component of the identification process was the review of the data and determination of identification status. Stakeholders interviewed for this study discussed two challenges. The first commonly discussed policy was determining who can and cannot be identified and admitted into gifted and talented programs. Fourteen of the 16 schools set cut scores on specific measures; students scoring below the cut scores cannot be identified for gifted and talented programs (see Table 4). Individual schools within those districts or states have struggled to meet the needs of ELs because of the difficulties with test-taking and assessment, and personnel have developed a number of strategies to work within and around the system.

Teachers suggested earlier testing in students' native language. One teacher invited a translator to give the test directions in Spanish for a middle school student who was strong in math, but English language was a barrier. The teacher stated, "I was there also, and the child did very well. But I'm not aware of that happening a lot" (District gifted coordinator interview, 1-1-B, March 9, 2016). When a particular test was viewed as a barrier, a gifted coordinator commented,

> If these scores come back and there are some kids that you're kind of shocked that they didn't pass the screening well maybe you might want to do another screener like do the KBIT [Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test] on those kids. (District gifted coordinator interview, 3-1-B, May 5, 2016)

Another gifted coordinator practiced the following strategy:

> A personal practice of mine is to talk to those ESL teachers and find out who were the kids that were learning quickly, and we could look at their SAT scores and if they weren't scoring in that ninetieth percentile doesn't mean that the students are not going to be considered . . . we can use the Aprenda as well. (District gifted coordinator focus group, 3-2-A, May 25, 2016)

These quotations reflect the focus on students' needs and the willingness to match assessments to students' current strengths.

The second concern interview participants had during this component of the identification process was the lack of direct communication and coordination between the EL and gifted education departments when they shared, or potentially shared, the same students. In contrast, exemplary communications strategies were noted when the district gifted coordinator described how the EL department agreed to post all documents on the website related to gifted education in Spanish and English and declared that "all letters that go home are translated in Spanish for our Spanish-speaking families, our actual brochures are in Spanish as well" (District gifted coordinator interview, 1-1-A, March 8, 2016). At two other schools, the EL teachers and gifted specialists held joint meetings and reviewed student data as a team. In addition, one school formed an EL advisory committee to work with the gifted specialists, while others conducted or stated they would like to conduct professional learning sessions for EL and gifted specialists together on topics relevant to both departments, such as how ELs who are gifted might be supported in having their abilities recognized in the classroom.

The final component of the identification process was placement. Both school personnel and parents, guardians, or caretakers expressed concerns about the mismatch between testing in a native language and services provided in English. In the words of one parent,

> Services are only offered in English and so when kids are advanced or they have different needs when they're in kindergarten and first grade there is nobody who can provide those services for them in the language that they're learning in. (Parent focus group, 2-1-B, May 6, 2016)

One administrator talked about the balance between flexibility in testing and rigor in services, stating,

> Are we flexible? Maybe a child is not fully ready . . . but show signs of . . . high level of thinking . . . That really sticks out to me with the EL students, because again, they have to navigate a lot, two languages, two cultures. (Administrator interview, 1-3-B, September 15, 2016)

## Emergent Themes Related to Identification of Gifted ELs

We identified four themes that emerged from the inductive qualitative analyses: (a) adopting universal screening procedures, (b) creating alternative pathways to identification, (c) establishing a web of communication, and (d) viewing professional learning as a lever for change. The four themes are presented here for review and reflection by state and local decision makers responsible for the screening, nomination/referral, identification, and placement of ELs in gifted and talented programs.

### *Theme 1: Adopting Universal Screening Procedures*

The nine districts employed universal screening procedures in one or more grade levels to assess students' academic and reasoning skills, which provided opportunities to display their abilities and achievement. Rather than identifying students' deficits to prevent them from receiving services, school personnel sought evidence of students' strengths from a variety of sources. Data sources included nominations/referrals, rating scales, and portfolios to supplement universal screening results. In addition, schools administered different nonverbal ability assessments (e.g., CogAT [nonverbal subtest], NNAT, Raven's Progressive Matrices, Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence [CTONI], Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test [UNIT]). These assessments provided perspectives on students' reasoning abilities.

School personnel recognized that giftedness manifests in different ways and at different times, which is why the identification process extended across grades. Time was on the side of students who were in the process of learning English. Indicators of students' abilities included the speed of English language acquisition and the rate of mastering reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in English, as well as math, science, and social studies content. As students' mastery of English progressed, school personnel were better able to recognize students' giftedness. Therefore, universal screening was not a 1-time event on an inflexible timetable. It was more important to account for language differences, seek alternative pathways to identification, and ensure native language assessments were appropriate and culturally sensitive.

### *Theme 2: Creating Alternative Pathways to Identification*

Nine of the 16 schools created alternative pathways to identification. These schools used a variety of different assessment instruments. When available, schools used native language ability and achievement assessments as indicators of potential giftedness. Ability assessments implemented in Spanish included Bateria III Woodcock-Muñoz and Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC)–Spanish. Achievement tests in Spanish included Aprenda and Logramos. Schools maintained a list of multilingual school psychologists qualified to administer assessments in Spanish. Unfortunately, standardized, norm-referenced tests are typically limited to Spanish.

As previously stated, school personnel avoided a deficit model that blocks students from services and implemented practices that sought to identify students' strengths. This process took one of the two forms: preparation programs or talent pool lists of students. Prior to formal identification procedures, personnel at five schools incorporated preparation programs in the early grades or beyond the school day. Students were involved in learning opportunities to enhance knowledge and academic skills necessary for students to be recognized and screened at a future time. These opportunities also enabled program personnel to serve as talent scouts who recognized students' strengths in learning environments that differed from the students' general education classroom experiences. At another subset of five schools, students who did not meet the identification criteria were considered part of the

talent pool, which meant they received gifted services alongside formally identified students. These experiences not only met the students' learning needs but also helped develop the knowledge and academic skills necessary to later be identified for official program services.

Throughout implementing universal screening procedures and creating alternative pathways to identification, it was important to establish effective and intentional communication techniques or a "web of communication."

### *Theme 3: Establishing a Web of Communication*

Schools established a web of communication in which all personnel were aware of the identification system in its entirety and were empowered to interact with one another in all components (i.e., screening, nomination/referral, identification, and placement) to identify ELs' talents. Multilingual instructors were an essential component of these webs. In some cases, they were the first persons at the school to recognize ELs' advanced skills. Multilingual staff members' interactions with the gifted specialists and their participation with gifted identification committees increased the number of ELs considered for the gifted and talented program.

Identification committees included representatives with key responsibilities in various roles (e.g., administrators, classroom teachers, gifted specialists, district gifted coordinators, EL teachers, multilingual personnel, school psychologists or counselors, special education personnel) and departments. Educators within and across specializations/departments (e.g., general education, English as a second language [ESL], special education) offered their perspectives on the gifts and talents of ELs in various educational environments. Such collaboration and communication regarding identification highlighted the need to foster and search for potential talents among small or large groups of ELs. It was evident that when a higher proportion of students in a school were ELs, their needs became a primary focus of school personnel and the web of communication tended to be better developed. Communication was necessary within and outside of school.

Developing and implementing intentional outreach approaches to the school community, particularly parents, guardians, or caretakers, was a critical strategy. Clearly written program information available via district or school websites, video segments posted to school websites and shareable via social media, information and community-building nights held at the school or in conjunction with community groups, and regularly distributed newsletters served as examples to maintain interconnected communication strategies between and among district personnel; school personnel; parents, guardians, and caretakers; and community members.

Among the schools, parent, guardian, or caretaker involvement was important but not consistent within or across schools. Some parents, guardians, or caretakers were reticent to contact the school about their children's giftedness. If one child in a family had previously been identified as gifted, parents, guardians, or caretakers were more likely to approach the schools about a second child. Without these webs of communication among administrators, district gifted coordinators, classroom

teachers, gifted specialists, multilingual teachers, and parents, guardians, or caretakers, the observations of individuals with firsthand knowledge of ELs' gifts and talents would have been lost.

Data gathering procedures are often complex using assessment, performance, and observational information. However, all procedures require background knowledge and expertise about characteristics of students with gifts and talents. To gain a knowledge base, professional learning is necessary to illuminate the characteristics of ELs with gifts and talents and to develop effective identification practices (Lynch, 2018).

### *Theme 4: Viewing Professional Learning as a Lever for Change*

Personnel in this research study used, or wanted to use, professional learning as a lever for change. Educators and parents, guardians, or caretakers who understood that giftedness can be revealed in different ways were more likely to identify ELs as gifted. The challenge these schools faced was how to provide the necessary professional learning to share this understanding with all stakeholders. To achieve a goal of equitable representation of ELs in gifted and talented programs, school personnel offered professional learning opportunities about effective identification practices and procedures.

Parents, guardians, or caretakers were the most overlooked group. Personnel at three schools discussed ongoing efforts to reach out to parents, guardians, or caretakers (see Table 5). Schools that offered professional learning created a school climate where personnel recognized the goal of gifted identification was to identify students' strengths, rather than using weaknesses to serve as roadblocks to identification. In this climate, personnel viewed having more than one language as an asset, rather than a deficit.

## Discussion

The emergent themes from the qualitative study of EL identification procedures and practices confirmed current literature. For example, Card and Giuliano (2016) and Makel et al. (2016) supported the importance of adopting universal screening procedures (Theme 1) as an equal opportunity and equitable approach to determining gifts and talents among students. Screening may occur with achievement or intelligence tests at one or more grade levels. Callahan (2018), Makel et al. (2016), Matthews (2018), Matthews and Peters (2018), McBee (2006), and Renzulli and Reis (2014) recommended creating alternative pathways (Theme 2) to ensure that test data are not the sole criterion for identifying gifted and talented students. Even though there was confirmation of Themes 1 and 2, it must be recognized that our study findings focused entirely on identifying EL students for gifted and talented programs, which represents a contribution to the research literature.

Establishing a web of communication (Theme 3) and viewing professional learning as a lever for change (Theme 4) are unique to our qualitative findings. Once again, the uniqueness of these findings is important because of the central focus on ELs and the identification procedures and practices for gifted and talented programs.

The research evidence documented here reflects new and growing awareness, knowledge, and skills for addressing historical and persistent patterns of underrepresentation of ELs in gifted and talented programs, which Wiggin's (2017) confirmed in recent research. In addition, patterns of underrepresentation are not unique to the United States. Blackburn et al. (2016) addressed similar identification issues in Australia. They highlighted the dearth of research on critical baseline and programmatic issues, including the number of gifted ELs in Australia, students' native languages, facilities with other languages, and previous experiences with English. These data sources would broaden information about talents and abilities of ELs.

There are no uniform solutions to addressing the underrepresentation of ELs in gifted programs. Several years ago, Esquierdo and Arreguin-Anderson (2012) stressed the importance of a "strong focus on educating and informing teachers, parents, and the community about the characteristics and identification process" (p. 35) of gifted ELs. Without making the identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs a policy initiative, perceptions of gifted students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic groups will continue to be influenced by dominant cultural and language groups (Renzulli & Brandon, 2017). More than two decades ago, Fernández et al. (1998) warned that biases may exist because of definitional and conceptional issues related to giftedness. The nomination/referral stage may be affected by cultural bias, even if data are gathered from educators from culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Fernández et al., 1998). Later, Kloosterman (2002) asserted, "Neither cultural difference nor language ability in English should be used as a parameter for excusing the exclusion of students in programs for the gifted and talented" (p. 175).

Developing teacher; parent, guardian, or caretaker; and community capacities and understandings of giftedness may support and enhance equitable representation in gifted education. This evolution in practice originated in the daily work of teachers, school personnel, and administrators committed to recognizing and serving the needs of students, across differences that include language-acquisition, immigration, and socioeconomic status. This reflects a paradigm shift where all stakeholders move from being deficit detectives, who search for reasons why students should not qualify for gifted services (Renzulli, 1994–1995), to talent scouts, who recognize the diverse ways students manifest their talents (Clarenbach, 2015; Kearney et al., 2017; O'Brien et al., 2017; Siegle, 2018; Swanson et al., 2019).

In this study, many practices provided examples of ways in which educators sought to include alternative tests, flexible cutoff scores, and advanced learning opportunities using their current district policies. These are all important remedies in the systems that have been in place, and all educators should have access to information about how to utilize them to benefit the students they serve.

Historic patterns of underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs illustrated in this study can be disrupted by recognizing the barriers of current and past practices and pursuing new culturally sustaining approaches. As demonstrated by group and individual interview participants, this begins with evaluating and changing current practices that function as barriers to recognizing and serving the advanced learning needs of students in underrepresented groups (McCoach et al., 2016).

To make more than incremental progress toward these goals for ELs, educators must examine underlying philosophical beliefs about predominantly monolingual approaches to education and the existence of gifts and talents across all populations in creating professional learning opportunities. Professional learning as a lever for change should extend to an analysis of the placement data: Which students were identified? Which students were referred for additional assessments or collection of performance data? Which students were placed on a talent pool list? As these questions are addressed, it is important to develop a systematic approach to analyzing district and school demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, FRPL, ELs). Student status as identified or not identified for gifted and talented programs, along with goals for ensuring equitable opportunities to participate in such programs, should be discussion review points.

Recognizing that students' cultural and linguistic identities are inseparable from their academic identities, it is essential to provide a welcoming and inclusive school climate for all students and their families. Parent, guardian, or caretaker, and community involvement provides connections between students' home and school experiences, fostered by the types of district and school communication practices recommended in this study. The future of culturally and linguistically sustaining gifted and talented programs in the United States is one that will reflect the diversity of our student population across all differences, measured at the local level in every school building.

## Limitations

The results of this study of identification practices of ELs for gifted and talented programs must be viewed in terms of limitations related to site selection and the implementation of semi-structured interview and focus group questions with participants representing various educational roles and responsibilities. Specific criteria guided site selection within three states with gifted and talented identification and programming mandates. Three districts in each of the three states in different parts of the country served as the data collection sites at 16 schools. The number of schools is a small sample; therefore, limited conclusions about identification procedures and practices can be drawn. Given the study implementation in three states, three districts within each state, and 16 schools across the states, we do not make any claims about representativeness using qualitative research methods.

A second limitation of the data is that a two-member research team spent one day at each school collecting interview and focus group data. Although a total of 225 people from multiple roles with varying levels of direct involvement with identification procedures shared information, the time commitment with schools and the use of focus groups prevented in-depth visits. Within focus groups, researchers posed questions and one or more persons may have been willing to share responses. All focus group members may not have been polled individually to elicit responses. In addition, one or more persons may have consistently responded to questions. If researchers did not elicit responses from multiple participants, the resulting data may not have been as informative as possible.

A third limitation is the design and implementation of semi-structured interview and focus group protocols. All protocols were shared orally, and, at times, the questions included multiple subquestions. Attention to each subquestion may not have been equal, which may have affected details needed to fully address the questions from different perspectives.

Finally, we base these findings on practices we observed during our visits to schools that were successfully identifying ELs for gifted services. Because we did not visit schools with lower EL identification rates, we do not know if these practices are unique to schools that successfully identify ELs for gifted and talented programs.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study of identification practices of ELs for gifted and talented programs. However, it is also critical to review the promising practices for improving identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs and to determine the extent to which they can be adopted or adapted to local schools and districts.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study on the identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs offers insights into practices that may lead to equitable representation of ELs in gifted programs. Specifically, our research suggests methods for improving identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs (see Figure 1) across four phases of the identification process: Pre-Identification, Preparation, Identification, and Acceptance of Placement.

Professional learning improves school personnel's awareness of EL issues related to identification. This increased awareness results in changes in identification practices, the evolution of a web of communication among all stakeholders, and modifications in program services.

Changes in identification practices include providing pre-identification opportunities to encourage emergence of talents, using universal screening to avoid overlooking talented students, establishing alternative pathways to identification to increase opportunities for talent to be recognized, frequently screening students to identify students whose talents manifest later, and using culturally appropriate assessments, such as testing in the student's native language. Each practice has the potential to increase the number of ELs identified for gifted services.

The web of communication (see Figure 2) promotes awareness of EL talent among all stakeholders (e.g., administrators, district gifted coordinators; gifted specialists; parents, guardians, or caretakers; EL specialists, classroom teachers, school psychologists, or counselors). This promotes a practice of all stakeholders serving as talent scouts.

Improved awareness of EL identification issues results in modifications to program services that involve inclusion of culturally responsive curriculum and adding support services to ensure ELs are successful in the gifted and talented program. These modifications increase trustworthiness in communication among stakeholders and may improve acceptance rates and placement of ELs in the gifted and talented program.

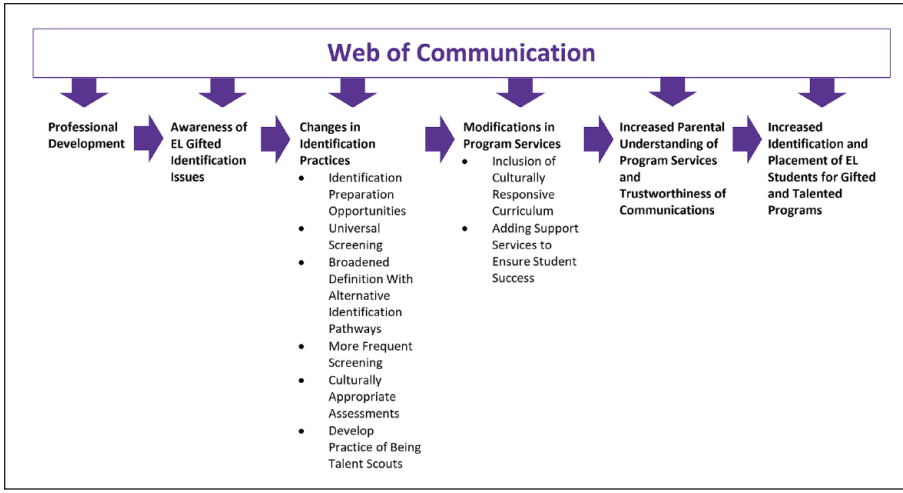


**Figure 2.** Web of Communication process for improving identification of ELs for gifted and talented programs.
*Note.* EL = English learners.

Future studies involving other states with gifted and talented identification and programming mandates and different cohorts may yield additional insights into the interconnectedness of the four phases for Improving Identification of ELs for Gifted and Talented Programs (see Figure 1). Such research studies may promote attention to more pathways leading to equitable representation of ELs in gifted and talented programs.

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