



We Can Identify and Serve ESOL GATE Students: A Case Study

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“Where are they? Where are our ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) GATE students?” I wanted to cry as each gifted and talented education (GATE) class walked through my door. I had been thrilled to be offered the position as the GATE resource teacher at a public middle school. The demographics mirrored the heterogeneity of my upbringing and were similar to the “melting pot” of many modern urban areas. In addition to a rich ethnic mix, more than 62% of the students were ESOL, speaking 37 languages.

I arrived excited by the possibility of using my background, language abilities, and advanced training in gifted education programs. You can imagine my dismay as the GATE classes arrived. The demographics of the school were not reflected in them. Each class was homogeneously Caucasian with, at most, one African American or Asian student. Hispanics were totally absent. Worst of all, not one of the GATE students was an ESOL student.

Instead of challenging a diverse group of learners, we were warehousing ESOL students in English language development classes with teachers who had no experience with gifted education strategies. For the most part, these youngsters and their families did not complain. No one

communicated with ESOL families about school programs and educational opportunities during registration or when schools requested help with conferences, meetings, or the creation of publications and newsletters. ESOL youngsters simply moved through their 3 years with us, went on to the high school, and often dropped out before receiving their diplomas.

In the face of these realities, I wanted to see if we could turn attitudes around, engage families and the community in our school programs, identify our ESOL gifted population, and then serve them in a meaningful manner.

Existing GATE Screening

The lack of ESOL students in the GATE program was not surprising. The GATE program for the entire school district relied on standardized testing using the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT; Otis & Lennon,

2003) as the primary indicator of intellectual promise. According to the publisher of the OLSAT, the test measures the cognitive abilities that relate to a student's ability to learn and succeed in school. It is widely regarded as a reliable and valid assessment of students' thinking skills that provides an understanding of a student's relative strengths and weaknesses in performing a variety of reasoning tasks. The information provided by the test results allows educators to design educational programs that will enhance students' strengths while supporting their learning needs.

It was unlikely that students functioning at the basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) level of second language acquisition would test well on the OLSAT (Castellano, 2003). Yet, in my heart, I believed that some of the more than 800 ESOL students in the school must have high intellectual promise.

Because the school district was experiencing a major budget downturn, no money was available to purchase new screening tools, such as the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT; Naglieri, 2006), or to pay licensed test administrators, or to develop and pilot new screening methodologies. Any plans I would present to screen for ESOL GATE students would have to work within the existing district parameters.

Those parameters promised nothing for ESOL students. Unless their parents removed them from the testing pool, all second graders (except those with diagnosed disabilities) took the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test. Students scoring more than one standard deviation above the national norm would enter the screening process by which GATE students were identified. The OLSAT was not routinely offered to any student entering the district after the second grade.

Instead, parents of students new to the district had to specifically request testing. Few parents of ESOL students knew about the district's GATE programs or understood about the screening process. It was doubtful whether any of these parents understood that they could request testing for their children.

The numbers in this school alarmed me. More than 800 of the nearly 1,300 students were excluded from the GATE screening process due to the combined reasons of having limited English language ability or entering the school system after the second grade. I was unwilling to perpetuate a system that discounted the potential of so many students. The question should not have been whether these students could score highly enough on the OLSAT. Instead, the staff and administration should have been asking, "Who are the potentially gifted students in this non-English-speaking population?" Thereafter, the questions should focus on how to support these students' emerging giftedness.

My principal was easy to convince. He was a celebrated role model for the ESOL population, having arrived in the United States at age 5 with only the clothes on his back. He encouraged my idea to seek out high-potential ESOL students, and together we outlined the steps necessary to bring capable ESOL students to screening. Convincing the faculty that we had gifted ESOL students, that we could identify them, and that we could provide both gifted courses and necessary support for the students was a hard sell. Surprisingly, the other hard sell was to the parents of the ESOL students.

ESOL GATE Screening

The ESOL faculty was initially intrigued but suspicious about my

proposal to screen their students for placement in the GATE program. Being included in discussions about GATE eligible students and GATE programs was foreign to them. Together, we discussed the implications of GATE screening for their students and came to several understandings regarding screening procedures, GATE course placements, and ESOL student support, all of which were key to the subsequent success of our collaborations.

Next, we needed to inform the parents of the ESOL students of our desire to include high-potential ESOL students in the GATE program and to enlist their support for testing. With parental support, we would create a test-eligible pool of ESOL students whom we would test using the OLSAT.

To inform parents and students about GATE programming and screening, we approached them through small-group meetings attended by translators who were already known to and trusted by the parents—a tedious process spanning 3 months due to the need for scheduling trained translators in 37 languages. Thereafter, the ESOL teachers sent translated letters to the parents of all of their students reiterating the information shared at the information sessions. A final, personal contact was made to the families of specific students whom the faculty believed demonstrated academic promise or who had, themselves, expressed interest in taking the OLSAT.

Any ESOL student who tested within one standard deviation of the mean would receive further consideration for selection to the GATE program. Our rationale for considering ESOL students whose scores were ≥ 85 or at the 84th percentile was that they demonstrated high test-taking skills. To score within one standard

deviation of the mean suggested that these students were functioning at a high level, as reading was key to testing well on the OLSAT.

We intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive of emerging talent. Thus, we would use a consensus approach, offering placement in specific GATE courses for the following year to those students whom we believed needed the faster pace and higher thought processes of GATE courses. Areas of academic strength, progress in acquiring English, teacher recommendations, and the availability of domain-specific academic support would guide our recommendations.

Testing

These efforts identified a pool of 16 potential GATE ESOL students. Although this number seemed small, none of us was disappointed. We were working to inform families about programs to which they had never been invited. We needed to overcome distrust and fear. We needed to build success—success that could only come with time and the careful nurturing of these budding scholars.

The 16 students took the OLSAT in late February. Prior to the test, the ESOL faculty arranged three practice test sessions. The purpose of these sessions was to familiarize the students with the test's directions and multiple-choice format. The students took sample tests from the state's bank of released standards-based testing. At each session, the students were encouraged to seek clarification about any part of the testing process that concerned them. The ESOL faculty also taught the students about eliminating unlikely answers or distracters.

When the students took the OLSAT, the school district's Office of Testing scored the answer sheets. This

eliminated any suggestion of impropriety. We could be confident that the results were a fair estimate of these students' test-taking abilities at the time of the test.

The ESOL teachers sat with the Director of Guidance and me to review the results for each of the 16 students. The test results seemed to indicate that six of the students should be offered GATE placements. Yet, we recognized that a standardized test, alone, could provide an estimate only of the students' abilities. If we relied on test scores in isolation of other indicators of promise, such as curiosity, perseverance, and the need for faster paced instruction (Moon & Dixon, 2006), none of these ESOL students would qualify for GATE placements.

The ESOL teachers presented a portrait of how well each student was progressing in acquiring English, of how diligent each student was toward school tasks, and of any "spark" for learning that the student exhibited. We agreed to err in favor of the student if a student profile was unclear because we would continue to support these students' development of English and could offer them a place in the extended academic afterschool program in place at this school.

As a result of these discussions, nine students were offered placement in one or more GATE courses for the following academic year. During the summer, two of the nine left the school district. The remaining seven elected to accept GATE placements. Over the summer, the Director of Guidance placed an eighth ESOL student in the GATE program. This student had transferred into the school, bringing records that attested to high potential from another school within the district.

Flexibility

When any students were found eligible for the GATE program, this school offered opportunities more flexible than those found in many schools. This occurred in part because the number of students at the school hovered around 1,300. Such large numbers supported multiple possibilities not only in each academic domain, but also in the fine and performing arts. Additionally, the school was a true middle school. Students were organized into houses taught by a designated team of professionals. Students were allowed to cross over to another team to receive appropriately challenging courses not available on their home team.

For the ESOL GATE students, this flexibility meant that each student could attend those GATE courses that would support their developing potential while they continued with their special ESOL language development courses. A-Level ESOL students had little English. B-Level ESOL students had some English, but were not yet reading and writing English with ease. C-Level ESOL students had acquired basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and usually were placed in general education English classes.

Two advanced classes, GATE social studies and GATE English, were open to GATE students. For students to qualify for GATE social studies and GATE English, they were expected to be able to read material at an advanced level with accuracy and speed. They also had to be able to express complex ideas orally and in writing using Standard English. High-performing mathematics students could take high school algebra if they passed the districtwide algebra screening examination or presented an OLSAT

Table 1
ESOL GATE Information

Name ^a	ESOL Level ^b	OLSAT-V	OLSAT-Q	Placement Offer	Final Grade ^c
Yusef	B	83	90	Social Studies	Left district
Kaylin	B	94	98	Social Studies	Left district
Liu	A	71	104	Social Studies	D+
Quig	A	86	102	Social Studies	B+
Tuiono	B	87	83	Social Studies Algebra	B+ B+
Manuel	B	89	82	English Social Studies Algebra	F C+ D+
Chai	B	102	105	Social Studies	B
Zihong	C	74	95	English Social Studies Algebra	B+ B+ C+
Miote	C	105	104	English Social Studies	A A
Asaghe	C	none	none	Social Studies	B+

^aAll names are pseudonyms. ^bA-level students have limited to no prior English at the start of the year. B-level students have acquired basic English speaking and some reading abilities. These students have not yet acquired BICS. C-level students have acquired BICS. ^cSchool Division Grading Scale as follows allows no "minus" grades:

A = 94–100%, B+ = 90–93%, B = 84–89%, C+ = 80–83%, C = 74–79%, D+ = 70–73%, D = 64–69%, F = below 64%

qualitative score at least two standard deviations (≥ 130) above the norm.

We agreed that ESOL students at the A-Level would remain in their ESOL English language development classes but would attend GATE social studies. Students at the B-Level would be considered for GATE English but would have to exhibit clear potential to be offered that class. Students at the C-Level took general education English as a normal part of their program. We planned to offer both GATE social studies and GATE English placements to any C-Level GATE-eligible ESOL students.

Several years earlier, the school had established an afterschool academic assistance program. Generally, this assistance program provided remedial help for struggling students. The principal volunteered to set aside one tutor from the program to work with ESOL GATE students in the domains of social studies and English.

Specialized help in algebra was not provided in the afterschool academic assistance program. The tutors did not have the specialized abilities needed to support algebraic understandings. The mathematics faculty provided help in any level of mathematics during regular afterschool sessions held for all interested mathematics students.

Specific Student Outcomes

Table 1 summarizes the information for 10 students offered GATE placements and is arranged in 4 groups. The students are arranged by ascending OLSAT verbal scores within levels of English proficiency. The names of these students are pseudonyms.

The first two students, both at the B-Level of English acquisition, moved from the school district during the summer after screening. They had been offered GATE social studies placement based on the explanation above. The OLSAT scores shown for eight of the remaining students demonstrate that scores alone were not the deciding factor for offering GATE courses or algebra.

A-Level

Two A-level students were offered GATE placements. As discussed above, A-level ESOL students would be offered placement in GATE social studies but not GATE English. Algebra placement occurred when students scored at least 130 on the OLSAT Qualitative measure or obtained high scores on the district algebra screening test.

The first student, Liu, presented an OLSAT-V score of 71. I did not believe that this score, approximately two standard deviations below the national mean, demonstrated potential giftedness. On the other hand, the ESOL faculty argued Liu's quantitative score of 104 demonstrated not only high potential in one domain but also an excellent understanding of test-taking skills and the academic English necessary to test well in one domain. The faculty also presented material that demonstrated that Liu was acquiring English more rapidly

than most ESOL students. Finally, the faculty also reminded the director of guidance and me that our agreement was to “err in favor of the student” if we were undecided about potential.

As a result, we offered Liu placement in GATE social studies. She earned a D+ for the year. In this school division where grade ranges are set by school board policy, a D+ translated to a numeric equivalent of between 70% and 73%, a score that is below average in most schools. (See Table 1 for a complete list of grade ranges.) Although we all wished the result had been better, Liu and her family expressed no disappointment, and she registered for a GATE history class for the following year with the endorsement of her then-current social studies teacher.

The second A-Level student, Quig, presented an OLSAT-V score within one standard deviation of the national norm. This score excited me because I believed that a non-native English speaker with very limited English must have very high potential to earn a score so close to the national mean. Quig enrolled in GATE social studies and earned a B+. This mark represented a numerical score between 90% and 93%, which would be in the A- range at most schools. He was enthusiastic about his experience in the class and needed no encouragement to continue with GATE placements.

Neither of these two A-Level ESOL students was offered GATE English or algebra placements. The screening committee had agreed prior to screening that A-Level ESOL students would acquire English best if they were retained within the ESOL department for that subject. In addition, scheduling A-Level ESOL English required a double block of class time. This double block prevented these two students from cross-

ing onto another team during the specific periods when algebra was offered. Additionally, their OLSAT-Q scores were well below those required by the district for algebra placement.

B-Level

The three B-Level students achieved OLSAT-V scores that seemed to indicate potential giftedness. Each accepted a different set of GATE course options. Two of these students appear to have been successful. The third appears to have been less successful, although extenuating circumstances suggest that he, too, was successful.

Chai presented the highest scores and was offered GATE placement in both social studies and English. He accepted the social studies placement. He and his family were reluctant to move him from the ESOL double block English. Despite the offer of the afterschool academic support in English, as well as in social studies, Chai remained firm in his wish to attempt only the social studies. He earned a B for the year, but conversations with his teacher revealed that he struggled to reach this level. Chai proved to be a reluctant participant, choosing to withdraw from all group work in the GATE class. Despite this classroom characteristic, the director of guidance recommended to Chai’s family that he continue in GATE history the following year and add GATE English.

Tuiono was our happy surprise. His scores did not seem to indicate especially high potential, yet his ESOL teachers all spoke of his quick mind and eagerness to use his ever-increasing English to characterize his ideas. In addition, he brought a fine background in mathematics. In a separate test administered by a member of the mathematics faculty, Tuiono

demonstrated that he understood and could use prealgebra skills as well as the English-speaking GATE students who had taken a full year of prealgebra. He and his family were happy to accept GATE placements in social studies and algebra.

Tuiono was offered placement in a GATE English class. His ESOL teachers provided multiple examples of his rapid acquisition of the language. However, due to scheduling conflicts, he had to choose between algebra or GATE English. Tuiono jumped at the opportunity to take algebra, and his family endorsed his course choices.

Tuiono earned a B+ in both algebra and social studies, demonstrating a high level of achievement. Based on this success and on the recommendation of the ESOL faculty, he exited the ESOL program and enrolled in a full schedule of GATE courses the following year.

If grades alone tell the story, Manuel appears to have been unsuccessful. His OLSAT scores were clearly lower than Chai’s, but his ESOL teachers presented a compelling case that Manuel needed GATE placement. In his ESOL classes, he played around and seemed to do no work yet could provide verbal or written answers with near 100% accuracy. Several examples of his work showed that he was acquiring English at a rate unmatched by any other student on his team. Similar to Tuiono, Manuel excelled on the algebra placement test. Unlike Tuiono, Manuel could be placed on a team with a schedule that allowed him to take both GATE classes and algebra.

Despite the picture of high potential painted by his ESOL teachers, his grades suggest that Manuel was unsuccessful. However, in light of outside events that affected his family, we were amazed that Manuel did as well as he did. His mother fell ill dur-

ing the school year, had multiple hospitalizations, and died. Considering those events and the grading scale for the school district, Manuel's marks suggested that the GATE courses were an appropriate placement for him. To help him overcome the English deficiency, Manuel enrolled in summer school, and we recommended that he register for GATE history and geometry for the following year.

C-Level

The three C-Level students spanned the same three placements as the B-Level students. They also met with success. Using grades as an external indicator of success, Miote achieved at the highest level of the three. Although his OLSAT scores were similar to those earned by Chai, Miote had demonstrated a much higher ability in his ESOL classes. His teachers were enthusiastic that Miote be offered GATE English, as well as GATE social studies. He did not qualify for algebra. His two A's at the end of the year told us that he was highly able. Miote registered for all GATE courses for the following year.

Zihong's OLSAT-V score did not appear to support a GATE placement, yet his ESOL teachers presented a compelling case for such placement. They recounted that he had arrived speaking no English one week after school had started in September. By November, he had been moved from the A-Level to the B-Level of ESOL English. They projected that he would move to C-Level soon, which did occur in late April. Nevertheless, I was concerned that his reading and writing might prove to be stumbling blocks.

Mindful of the decision to encourage our high-potential ESOL students by providing GATE placements

and supporting these placements with extra academic help, Zihong was offered GATE placements in English and social studies. He took the algebra placement test and scored so well that the mathematics department chair specially requested that he be scheduled into one of her sections of algebra.

The results speak highly of Zihong's abilities and potential. He, his family, and we were delighted by his progress and achievements. Zihong graduated at the end of the year. He registered with our endorsement for pre-International Baccalaureate courses (offered at the 9th- and 10th-grade levels) at the local high school.

The last ESOL student for whom we offered GATE placement was Asaghe. He transferred to our attendance area during the summer from another school in the district. Because none of the other schools in the district had screened their ESOL students for possible GATE placement, we relied on Asaghe's counselor to provide us with information about his potential. Unfortunately, none of his former teachers were able to meet with our guidance director during the summer, so she had no gauge of Asaghe's English proficiency or classroom academic behaviors. Again, mindful of our decision to "err in favor of the student," the director placed him in GATE social studies.

Asaghe earned a B+ in the GATE social studies. His teacher shared several glowing remarks about his participation and enthusiasm. She explicitly spoke of his well-written essays. In retrospect, we may have erred not to have supported a GATE English placement for Asaghe. Without sufficient information, however, we did not want inadvertently to create a difficult situation for him. He graduated, taking our strong recommendation

with him for enrollment in the pre-International Baccalaureate program.

Outcomes and Opportunities

The ESOL students selected for the GATE program experienced success, yet this success was just one result of this initiative. The achievements of this initial group of ESOL GATE students exceeded our expectations. All of the students registered in GATE courses for the following year or enrolled in the pre-International Baccalaureate Program course sequence at the high school. We did not expect the range of other, tangible differences that resulted from our year's work. These favorably affected our faculty, our student body, and the community served by this school.

The reality of our seeking potential in a previously underserved population yielded favorable remarks from families whose children were not a part of the GATE program, as well as from the community that this school served. When screening occurred the next February, ESOL families were very interested in having their students take the OLSAT. Having demonstrated that the school could effectively provide targeted placements with accompanying academic support, the ESOL families expressed eagerness for their children to be considered for inclusion in the GATE program.

Our original information meetings to inform the families about our GATE program and about our interest in serving high-potential ESOL students had been "edgy." Suspicion, uncertainty, disbelief, and even fear were among the initial reactions. By taking our time to present our ideas and by providing trusted translators and a forum for discussion, we

defused much of the parental worry. We believed that our initiative could be successful but success would be built by clearly explaining our plans, carefully answering questions, and providing appropriate support to the affected students.

Despite our best efforts, we could not defuse entirely the ESOL students' worries. In addition to normal preteen anxieties, these youngsters had fears about being moved out of their comfort zones within the ESOL program. Although there were more than 16 students who might have demonstrated high potential on the OLSAT test, only 16 were comfortable enough to take the test.

Due to the transparency with which we worked through the many concerns about the program, the entire school community lost its fear of including ESOL students in the GATE program. The concerns expressed by the teachers before ESOL students entered their GATE classes did not bear fruit. Instead, the GATE teachers became enthusiastic supporters of including high-potential ESOL students in their programs. Their enthusiasm had a ripple effect within the faculty. Several of the faculty made inquiry into special GATE training, and two applied to local universities to add gifted endorsements to their teaching credentials.

Although students, faculty, and community members developed new understandings and expectations, perhaps the most enduring effect of this initiative was on the school's students. Prior to this program, ESOL students fully participated in the nonacademic activities of the school but were nearly invisible in its academic activities. During this first year of ESOL GATE placements, many ESOL students, GATE and otherwise, received encouragement from their teachers to join the student

newspaper, become peer mediators, or compete on the mathematics team. At the awards assembly in June, more than 40 ESOL students received recognition for their contributions to and achievements in school-sponsored activities.

Another unexpected outcome occurred in our surrounding schools. Several inquired about our ESOL GATE program. We gladly explained what we were doing, with emphasis on two aspects of the program. We wanted everyone to recognize that ESOL students were, as a group, underserved. We also wanted to demonstrate how our program truly agreed with the district's existing GATE program. At no time did we wish to suggest that serving any population would result in a dilution of the program. Rather, we wanted to demonstrate that holistic screening coupled with targeted support could yield results beyond anyone's imagination. With our encouragement and using our model, the schools closest to ours began discussions with their faculties about expanding their GATE screening to identify and serve high-potential ESOL students.

A hallmark of the faculty members of our school was their creative and caring efforts to reach all students in any possible way. Yet, when I initially broached the possibility of expanding the GATE program to include high-potential ESOL students, the faculty was emphatically negative. In discussions with them at team meetings, they told me that they felt too stretched to be able to add yet another need to the many they already tried to meet. By providing the afterschool academic support for the ESOL GATE students through an existing program rather than by expecting teachers to provide individual support to these students, we not only defused the

faculty's concerns but created a model that we shared with other schools in the district.

By the end of the year, I had a new answer to my first week's plaintive cry of, "Where are they?" I knew that reaching out to identify and serve gifted ESOL students this first year had been an experiment. I had to convince my administration and faculty that we needed to do this. I had to overcome resistance within the school and then from the ESOL community. After students had been identified, I had to support the work of the faculty and students to ensure fairness and a favorable outcome.

The results were worth every discussion—even the heated ones. We all learned that we could think creatively to find and serve an underserved population. No longer were ESOL students excluded from the most academically rigorous courses. We learned that we could identify and serve ESOL GATE students. Is it time for you to do so, too? **GCT**

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