

Two Other Wrongs Don't Make a Right: Sacrificing the Needs of Diverse Students Does Not Solve Gifted Education's Unresolved Problems

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While Robinson argues that we are sacrificing the needs of gifted students—"we are punishing the innocent for the sins of a society that has been unable to conquer these problems" (p. 251)—I propose a different argument: We are punishing diverse students, also innocent victims, for the sins of a society and an educational system that have not adequately addressed historical and contemporary social injustices. Minority students who are gifted and have the potential to achieve at higher levels are being denied opportunities to participate in gifted education for numerous reasons. This position is followed by examples of such ills and recommendations that support and build upon those provided by Robinson to solve or resolve problems associated with the unnecessary competition between excellence and equity and between gifted education and diversity. I think that the different positions held by Robinson and myself both point to one central question: "How can schools provide all young people with certain basics that are necessary to their common citizenship and, at the same time, give them the diverse opportunities and treatment that their differential abilities require?" (Gardner, 1984, p. 89).

Introduction

Few school districts are able to boast of having gifted programs that proportionately reflect the demographics of their school system. Instead, a vast majority are rightfully concerned that culturally diverse students are underrepresented (significantly so) in their gifted education programs. Robinson has given considerable attention to efforts by schools to redress this concern, namely, different programmatic options, instructional adaptations, and measurement adaptations.

The primary thesis of Robinson's paper is that gifted students are innocent victims of a society that has failed to address its social ills. And, because of this failure to solve social inequalities, we are

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allowing too many gifted students to be denied an appropriate education. Because Robinson spends a significant amount of attention on how schools have attempted to increase the representation of culturally diverse and low-SES students in gifted education, it seems safe to conclude that the gifted students being denied appropriate education are middle-class and White students. On the one hand, it is obvious how middle-class and White gifted students might be denied services if more diverse and low-SES students are identified and placed. This is primarily a problem when schools place enrollment caps on the number or percentage of students who can be identified as gifted. On the other hand, the notion that middle-class and White students are being denied services seems unwarranted or unfounded. This position is somewhat akin to arguments regarding affirmative action and reverse discrimination. I have yet to see a report indicating that middle-class and White students are underrepresented in gifted programs. Rather, the reverse is true in at least three ways: (a) National reports indicate that middle-class and White students are “overrepresented” in gifted programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1998); (b) Since the 1980s, their representation has remained steady or increased, while the representation of culturally diverse students has decreased (Ford, 1998); and (c) low-SES students are underrepresented in gifted education (U.S. Department of Education). So, I am left to ask, to which group of gifted students is Robinson referring? Which group of gifted students is being denied access to gifted education programs based on our failure to solve the inequalities of our society?

In this paper, I propose that culturally diverse students and low-SES students are being denied appropriate educational opportunities; they are being denied access to gifted programs for many *correctable* social inequalities. My purpose is not to pit any group of children against another. However, in the process of sharing the experiences, the stories, and the realities of culturally diverse and low-SES students, such comparisons are inevitable. It is also not my intent to negate the concerns presented by Robinson; rather, I wish to paint a different picture, an equally disturbing picture, of how social ills impact the educational experiences of culturally diverse and low-SES students as they vie for limited seats and labels in gifted education.

Social Ills: Historical and Contemporary

Robinson describes many efforts by schools to help culturally diverse students who may benefit from gifted education to over-

come historical social ills, namely, racism and discrimination. The impact of racism and discrimination on students' motivation, achievement, and access to gifted education is clear and will not be reiterated here. What is worth discussing is how scholars treat the past and the present.

Like many scholars, Robinson attends primarily to past or historical grievances and how schools are attempting to make up for the vestiges of slavery and the denial of not just educational opportunities, but *equal* educational opportunities during segregation. This almost-stubborn attention to the past does three things. First, while it rightfully assumes that educational disadvantages from the past still affect diverse students today, it also asks that the victims "get over it and move on" or "let bygones be bygones." Of course, dwelling on the past can get tiring for the victims and the perpetrators, but forgetting the past is unacceptable. The past informs the present. Second, treating the past as the past is unhelpful because it ignores the reality that decades of denial to an (equal) education cannot be overcome easily or quickly. That is, uneducated slaves (generation 1) raised undereducated children (generation 2) who raised undereducated grandchildren (generation 3), and so on. And we have these grandchildren and great grandchildren—a few decades removed from slavery and segregation—in our classrooms competing with students whose ancestors and parents benefit(ed) from all that schools have to offer. Third, the focus on historical injustices is too often used to ignore, negate, or minimize contemporary social ills. De facto segregation exists today. But this was not adequately discussed by Robinson. Unfortunately, the past sins were given more attention by Robinson than present sins. The past was blamed more than the present. When the present is discussed, the get-over-it-and-move-on insinuation is harder to make. In the following paragraphs, I present a brief example of contemporary social ills and contend that diverse children continue to face insurmountable, but correctable, barriers to gifted programs and otherwise reaching their potential.

Contemporary Social Ills

Robinson focused almost exclusively on social ills in the homes of diverse and low-SES students. This could lead readers to assume that minority groups themselves are responsible for their own problems. And a great deal of Robinson's discussion focused on what was educationally ineffective or wrong, so to speak, in diverse and low-SES families. Given that a disproportionate percentage of Black

and Hispanic students live in poverty and single-parent homes, some of Robinson's discussion is warranted. The impact of poverty on student achievement is undeniable. But what are the experiences of diverse students who do not live in poverty and single-parent homes? Do they fair much better in gaining access to gifted programs than their counterparts? Recently, I (along with Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002) argued that deficit thinking is common in gifted education when discussions focus on culturally diverse students. By focusing on what is "wrong" with these families and students, we fail to notice their gifts and talents.

Clearly, no discussion of social ills is complete unless we also examine them in society-at-large and in schools. Families are not totally responsible for the educational status/condition of their children. Students spend 6 to 7 hours in school each day; the school's impact—positive and negative—cannot be ignored or denied. In other words, despite the legal end to segregated schools in 1954, culturally diverse students continue to be undereducated in American schools. Numerous legal cases, commissioned reports, and reports by the Office for Civil Rights have shown that Black and Hispanic students continue to be in classrooms (a) with the least prepared teachers; (b) with the least experienced teachers; (c) with fewer fiscal, physical, and educational resources; (d) with lower levels of instruction; and (e) with teachers who hold low expectations of them. All of these issues (and others not mentioned) directly hinder students' motivation, achievement, and opportunity to participate in and benefit from gifted education programs.

Likewise, many reports indicate that diverse students, especially Black students, are the victims of employment discrimination, judicial discrimination, and discrimination in other areas of life. The quality of life inside and outside of school is different for culturally diverse students: These students, in reality, do not have an equal opportunity to learn; thus, they do not have an equal chance of being identified and placed in gifted programs.

Why Efforts to Redress Inequities in Gifted Education Have Not Been More Effective

Many schools have attempted to increase the participation of culturally diverse and low-SES students in gifted programs, as noted by Robinson. Some efforts have been more effective than others, but, overall, these students continue to be underrepresented in gifted education. What might explain this phenomenon? My personal and

professional experiences point to attitudes, definitions, measures (traditional tests), policies and procedures, and programming.

Attitudes

This entire paper could have focused exclusively on how attitudes affect the decisions we make about diverse students (see Ford et al., 2002). Instead, I will present a list of statements that squelch the development of substantive initiatives.

- "If we make allowances for this group, some people will be upset." This is often an example of preserving the status quo and a fear of White flight. Substantive changes, therefore, are not made. Band-aids are applied to gaping wounds.
- "If we make an exception for one group, we'll have to do this for everybody." Doing things differently is equated with making an exception, which is considered unfair. therefore, no changes are made.
- "If we make changes, we will water down what we have now." This statement is at the heart of the excellence versus equity debate. "Different" is equated with "substandard or inferior." Changes are not made.
- "If we have to do something different with you, something must be wrong with you." Therefore, you have the problem, not me. So there is no need for me to change anything.
- "If we have to do something different for you, you won't succeed." This assumption is often made when different tests are proposed. It is argued that students might not be successful in the gifted program because of a different test being used. A subassumption is that there is something wrong with the newly proposed tests. The subsequent reasoning is that one should not risk the students' being unsuccessful. Nothing is done.
- "If it works for me, it should work for you." This is a self-centered assumption that fails to consider that children are, indeed, different. The focus is on the needs of the individual making the statement or on the group that he or she is seeking to protect, not on the needs of the other person or group. Thus, if a certain test is appropriate for one group, it is appropriate for another. No change is made.
- "Nothing is wrong with the way we are doing things; I like how we do things now." (In other words, we may need to change, but we don't want to. And we don't.)
- "We've always done it this way." (So why bother changing?)

Definitions

Many definitions of giftedness are numerical and dichotomous. Gifted students are those who have a certain IQ or achievement score; others are not gifted. However, intelligence, as measured by IQ scores, exists on a continuum, and few schools can offer a defensible rationale for the cutoff score selected. In some schools, the cutoff is 128, in others it is 130, and in others it is 132 or higher; the same holds true for achievement scores, which range from the 85th to 99th percentile. Thus, a child can be gifted in one school, but not another. And what happens academically and programmatically to students who miss being identified as gifted by one or two IQ points? These are often culturally diverse and low-SES students. Further, to identify gifted students, some schools use an intelligence test, some use an achievement test, and some use both. There is little consistency in definition and measurement.

On a different note, Sternberg (1985) and others have maintained that what is valued as gifted in one culture is not necessarily valued in another. Every culture has its own definition of what it means to be intelligent, bright, or highly able. However, many definitions of giftedness are colorblind or cultureblind, Eurocentric, monolithic, and narrow. One exception is the U.S. Department of Education's (1993) definition.

Traditional Tests

Space limitations make it impossible to tackle the issues and controversies regarding testing culturally diverse students. The debate about whether tests are biased against diverse students has received extensive attention in gifted education. I have argued elsewhere that traditional tests provide a narrow picture of the strengths and intelligence of culturally diverse students; thus, they must never be used as the sole instrument for identifying *any* student as gifted (National Association for Gifted Children, 2000). Studies have shown that nonverbal tests—less culturally loaded tests—show promise for capturing the strengths and potential of culturally diverse and low-SES students. However, schools seem to be hesitant about using tests that are different from traditional tests. Administrators and teachers often ask: "If we use this nonverbal test, how will we know if the student will be successful in our program?" or "How will we know the students' level of achievement?" The answer: from the achievement tests and grades of the students.

Nonverbal tests give underrepresented students an opportunity to demonstrate abstract thinking and problem solving with less

emphasis on verbal skills and proficiency. Verbal skills are already a significant part of traditional tests of intelligence, as well as achievement tests. Schools should be open to at least piloting nonverbal tests with their students; instead, much time is devoted to finding reasons to not make changes.

Procedures and Policies

Our field has spent a lot of time trying to find the “right” test to identify culturally diverse and low-SES students, and so have I. This heavy emphasis on testing issues distracts from our need to also focus on how procedural and policy issues contribute to representation problems. For examples, many schools use teacher referrals as the first step in the screening and identification process. In my experiences, this is ineffective because teachers are underreferring such students. Schools will also incorporate nonacademic variables in the materials used for placement decisions; attendance and behavior are two examples that come to mind. Thus, not only must gifted students be high achievers, they must also have high attendance and few or no behavioral problems. The inclusion of these other variables seems to affect diverse and low-SES students disproportionately. They may have high test scores, but poor attendance; they may have high grades, but many behavioral problems. These situations render the child unacceptable for gifted education services. Gifted education, in effect, is viewed as a privilege, not a need.

Programs

Like definitions and tests, the Procrustean-bed phenomenon is prominent when it comes to how gifted students are educated. The prevailing practice is to have a gifted program already in place and to find those students who fit the program. Gifted programs are seldom, from my experiences, tailored to gifted students. Further, gifted education is perceived as a place, a classroom, a building, and a center, rather than a service. Accordingly, we end up counting heads and finding ways to exclude, rather than to include, students. And we tend to not have appropriate programs and services for those students who just barely missed being identified as gifted. What services does a child with an IQ of 126, 127, 128, or 129 require who has not met gifted education criteria? What services does a child at the 90th percentile in achievement require, particularly when classmates are at the 60th percentile?

Not counting heads, but providing services, would go a long way toward decreasing the belief that a limited percentage of students

(e.g., 1–5% of the population) or a limited number of students (e.g., 85 students for a grade level) *should be or can be* identified as gifted. We tell all children to aim high, that there is enough room at the top for everybody. How can this be when we are only willing to identify and serve the top 1–5% or the top 85 students? When giftedness, or intelligence, is treated as a scarce commodity, few students will benefit.

Summary and Conclusions

It is great advocating for our students, as we must. Ironically, while Robinson and I hold different positions on the topic at hand, our recommendations are of one accord. Robinson presented a rather detailed set of recommendations for solving some of the social ills that affect gifted, culturally diverse, and low-SES students. I wish to reiterate the importance and substance of all of her recommendations and hope that schools consider seriously the need to change current practices and assumptions. As the old saying goes, "If we continue to do what we've always done, we'll continue to get what we've always gotten." In this case, we will continue to pit children against each other, with culturally diverse and low-SES students competing in a race that seems to be over for them before it has even begun. In essence, if we continue business as usual, we will continue to have a large segment of our population being denied access to gifted education programs and services.

Schools must become more reflective and examine the effectiveness and efficacy of continuing business as usual. Diverse students come to school with a unique history and a unique set of problems, many of them related to past and present social ills. These social ills are in our homes, our schools, and society-at-large. While educators cannot control what happens in students' homes and in the larger society, we do have some (much) control over the decisions we make in school settings. What attitudes and practices deny access to gifted programs for diverse and low-SES students? Which correctable social ills are schools willing to correct? I am hopeful that the responses support the notion that equity and excellence can and must coexist in education and our gifted programs. All educators must respond to the basic question raised by Gardner (1984): "How can the school provide *all* young people with certain basics necessary to their common citizenship and at the same time give them the diverse opportunities and treatment that their differential abilities require?" (p. 89). How do we make the most of gifted students

who begin life with social disadvantages and who live daily with social disadvantages? Our task as educators is to seek excellence and equity for all students.

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