

Do We Change Gifted Children to Fit Gifted Programs, or Do We Change Gifted Programs to Fit Gifted Children?

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In this article, I present a framework that can be used in our work with special groups of gifted students—one that recognizes the effects of socioeconomic status (SES), racism, and other limiting factors on educational achievement and provides a blueprint for interventions. This framework stems from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development and emphasizes the role of social support systems in the development of talent. I then argue that two important reasons to retain a strong focus on programs that serve minority students include the fact that the gap in achievement between minority and nonminority children is pervasive and exists even at high socioeconomic levels and that minority students' underachievement is largely attributable to cultural factors within our society.

Dr. Robinson has given us an important perspective on a major issue in the field of gifted education. Clearly, the underrepresentation of minority students in programs for the gifted has been a source of discontent among educators who work with gifted children and has caused those outside of the field to question our programs and practices. In her article, Robinson is essentially asking, "Why are we throwing the baby out with the bathwater?" Why do school districts dismantle and reject gifted programming because educators of the gifted (along with everyone else in the education community) have been unable to solve the major educational and social issue facing this country: the achievement gap between minority and nonminority children? I think the answer, in part, is that while gifted programming is not the cause of the achievement gap, it is often perceived as contributing to widening that gap, even though the same could be said of schooling in general.

Professor Robinson argues that, instead of the current focus on race as a variable of concern in the selection of students for gifted programs and in designing programs, perhaps a better focus, because of its profound effects on student achievement, is poverty. I agree

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that the effects of poverty on families' abilities to support their children's talent development and on children's ability to achieve are profound, complex, and pervasive. But, being a Caucasian female, I also believe that I cannot begin to fathom the effects of racial prejudice on students' motivation, expectations, achievement, and opportunities. Therefore, I do not know if one is more "important or profound" in its impact; and, as Robinson points out, they often co-occur, and their effects are difficult to disentangle.

Over the almost 20 years that I have been working in the field of gifted education, I have always administered programs for special groups of gifted students. In some cases, these groups consisted of students who were deemed "economically disadvantaged," defined as *low family income*, without regard to race. In other instances, the students were both minority and economically disadvantaged. At present, I am administering two programs for special populations of gifted students. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program identifies children who are low income, irrespective of race or ethnicity, and gives them long-term financial support for private-school tuition, summer-programs attendance, and other individualized special needs. A second project, Project Excite, identifies gifted minority children on the basis of nonverbal tests at third grade (regardless of family income) and provides supplemental educational programs during elementary and middle school aimed at preparing them to enter the most advanced tracks in high school. These projects reflect a range of thinking about whom is in special need and underserved in gifted programs.

What I want to do with the rest of this paper is argue for a perspective that can frame our work with special groups of gifted students—one that recognizes the effects of socioeconomic status (SES), racism, and other limiting factors on educational achievement and provides a blueprint for interventions. I would also like to present two compelling reasons, at least in my mind, why race as a variable must be attended to separately in gifted programs. Finally, I want to address the issue of whether gifted programs should change to meet the needs of minority gifted children or whether minority children should acquire the skills and content to succeed in typically structured gifted programs.

A Framework for Providing Services to Special Groups of Gifted Learners

In an article published in the *Roeper Review*, my colleagues and I (Olszewski-Kubilius, Grant, & Seibert, 1993) proposed that social

support systems and social networks should be used as lens with which to understand and assist “disadvantaged” gifted students. Social support systems is a concept based on the ecological model of development designed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, who proposed four nested or hierarchical structures (*microsystems*, *mesosystems*, *exosystems*, and *macrosystems*) that influence child development. *microsystems* include the lived environments of children, such as home, school, and neighborhood. *Mesosystems* consist of the linkages between *Microsystems*, such as home and school; the greater the number of links between *microsystems*, the greater their influence on the child (e.g., the importance of the home and school giving the same messages about the importance of achievement, or the park district working together with the school to provide quality after-school care and programs). *Exosystems* are settings in which decisions are made that affect children, such as park-district boards, school boards, and workplaces, but in which children do not participate directly (e.g., workplace policies that support parenting, such as allowing flexible hours). And *macrosystems* are the ideology and cultural and societal values that most broadly affect our lives, such as beliefs and attitudes about race, gender, achievement, and opportunity.

Each of these systems has an influence on the developing child’s social network and social support. Social networks, which every individual has, consist of all the people you know and with whom you interact. For a child, these include family members, teachers, coaches, members of the community and neighborhood, and even pets. The members of the social network are all connected to the child and may be connected to each other. The more connections among members, the greater the density of the social network and the greater the likelihood of substantial support for the individual’s optimal development.

Social networks provide social support to individuals in the form of information, direct assistance and aid, guidance, material support, and emotional support. Individuals vary in the extent to which their social support network facilitates their development, and some social networks will be more facilitative of the development of the gifts of a talented child than others. An optimal social support system for an academically gifted child would contain adults who recognized his or her ability and can access and utilize needed educational or psychological resources in the aim of talent development; family and community members that place a high value on achievement in school; peers with similar interests and attitudes toward achievement, schools with supportive learning climates; communities with insti-

tutions and organizations that provide supplemental services; parents who deliberately manage their child's social support system to ensure it is optimal; and mentors from the community who can provide tacit knowledge about careers, higher education, and so forth.

Researchers have primarily defined *disadvantagment* in economic and cultural terms. The concepts of social support networks and structures provide a far more useful view of disadvantage. They allow us to see disadvantage as a discrepancy between an individual's capacity for development in a socially valued area and the social supports needed to achieve that potential. In this view, disadvantage is a highly individualized phenomenon. However, previous work with disadvantaged students has not distinguished between the possible causes for the absence of supports (e.g., poverty or racism and the absence of the social supports themselves). Social support systems mediate the ways in which support is provided. To understand how poverty or racism affects a child, it is important to distinguish social supports themselves from the reasons they are absent.

Viewed in this way, gifted students can be disadvantaged for a variety of reasons. Parents may not be able to coordinate or build an appropriate social support system. Networks may not contain enough individuals with relevant competences who can help children relate to the larger world outside their schools and neighborhoods. Minority children and children from poverty may suffer from these and other lacks in their social supports systems. Children termed "middle class" who live in rural areas may be disadvantaged by the lack of resources and opportunities in their immediate community. While such children would not typically be targeted as special needs, the lens of social support systems focuses on the specific types of assistance they need. This view allows us several advantages over a focus on global variables, such as race and socioeconomic status.

Specifically, a social support systems perspective responds to and recognizes the differences within families of color and the differences within low-income families. Not all minority families are alike in terms of the supports they can or cannot offer to their talented children. The same is true for low-income families. This perspective allows educators who are interested in promoting the development of underrepresented groups a means to construct individual programs of support—ones that meet the specific needs of the family or child. Gifted programs are often criticized as being "one size fits all," and the same is often true of programs designed as interventions for special at-risk populations.

There are several available instruments that are potentially useful in assessing the social support systems of children, even though they were not designed specifically for this purpose. One is the Environmental Opportunities Profile (Slocumb & Payne, 2000), which assesses a variety of environmental background factors in students' homes, including the press for cognitive thinking and language use in the home, and the Checklist for Identifying Underachievement Among Gifted Black Students (Ford, 1996), which assesses risk factors in school, the home, and the peer group and individual psychological factors. In essence, a social support system framework provides a means to specify the effects of race and poverty on the lives of individual gifted children. In the process of delineating these effects, we may find commonalities between the impact of poverty and racism on the educational achievement of gifted students, but also unique effects of either variable.

Compelling Reasons for a Focus on Minority Status in Gifted Programming

In 1999, the College Board issued a report entitled *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*. This report examined the research about why there are achievement differences between minority and nonminority students and made recommendations regarding how the existing achievement gap could be ameliorated. The authors of that report concluded that

Going back to the 1960s, there is an extensive body of research showing that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students at virtually all socioeconomic levels do not perform nearly as well on standardized tests as their White and Asian counterparts. Significantly, some of the largest of these "within-class" test score gaps are often found at middle and professional class levels, at least when they are measured by the education of students' parents. (p. 9)

The report goes on to say that, for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test, African Americans and Latinos had much lower average reading scores than Whites, and the gap was larger for students with parents who had a college degree than for students with no parent who had a high school education. Similar findings have been found for performance on the SAT I.

This report cites as contributing factors to the achievement gap between minorities and nonminorities the following factors: the low economic circumstances of many minority families, low levels of parents' education that affect their capacity to provide a range of supports to their children, racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination, cultural differences and peer influences, and poorer school resources. In discussing the ways in which racial prejudice impacts achievement, the authors noted that there is extensive research evidence that widely held beliefs about minorities affect their achievement at all SES levels in at least two ways. One way is that educators and others have significantly lower expectations regarding the academic achievement of students of color, resulting in students taking fewer advanced courses and receiving less rigorous curricula, even if they are from affluent families. A second way is the psychological effects of minority students' own beliefs that they are intellectually inferior to White students (The College Board, 1999), which leads to their underachievement.

Recent thinking and research echoes the psychological issues that affect gifted minority students' achievement. Ford (1996) suggested that gifted minority students experience "social class change anxiety" or guilt, anxiety, and depression when their grades or test performances or achievement surpass those of other minority students and family members and sets them apart from those with whom they most identify and love. Studies show that minority students performance on standardized tests, such as the SAT or ACT, can be depressed when they are given messages about the negative ramifications of high scores on the test (e.g., social isolation from peers or their race) prior to taking it (Lovaglia, Lucas, Houser, Thye, & Markovsky, 1999). The College Board (1999) report concluded as follows:

While it is difficult to quantify the overall negative impact of prejudice and discrimination on the educational fortunes of underrepresented minority students, we have strong reason to believe that it is large. Moreover, it is a special burden, one that majority students, even if they are from very poor families, are likely to have difficulty comprehending fully. The recognition that racial and ethnic prejudice continues to be a powerful negative educational force is an important reason why members of the Task Force remain fully committed to affirmative action. (p. 17)

A second reason for a concerted focus on minority status as a critical, defining variable in our efforts to serve gifted students has to do

with the role of culture and, particularly, how minority cultures influence minority student achievement.

Ogbu (1994), who has studied minority achievement extensively, has asserted that minority groups have cultures of their own and that the relationship between the minority culture and the mainstream culture affects minority students' achievement. He made a distinction between voluntary minorities and involuntary minorities. Involuntary minorities, which include African Americans in the U.S., have both primary cultural differences (those that exist before minorities and nonminorities come into contact, such as language, customs, etc.) and secondary cultural differences (those that exist after minorities try to participate in social institutions, such as schools that are run by nonminorities). Secondary cultural differences emerge as a strategy on the part of involuntary minorities to deal with prejudice and oppression and include things like cognitive style, preferred learning style, communication style—all of which impact learning. The ultimate strategy for minorities is *cultural inversion*: the tendency to regard certain behaviors, in this case, school-related achievement behaviors, as characteristic of White Americans and as “acting White” and, therefore, not appropriate for a Black person. Cultural inversion can include using language differently or having a different orientation toward time or even outright rejection of what the majority group considers acceptable or appropriate school behavior (Ogbu). Ford (1996) also noted cultural and value differences between Blacks and Whites on such dimensions as communication style (Blacks emphasize verbal and nonverbal modes and context, Whites emphasize verbal modes over nonverbal and deemphasize context) and family bonds (Blacks emphasize extended-family connections and Whites emphasize nuclear-family types) and other dimensions, as well.

Ogbu (1994) suggested that educators and “interventionists” should help Black students to “accommodate without assimilation” (p. 372) or find ways to maintain school achievement without losing their cultural connection or identity. The implications of this research for educators of the gifted are that there are unique obstacles and needs that being a minority brings into play and, therefore, require a deliberate focus and emphasis on taking race into consideration in our selection procedures, program designs, and interventions.

The essence of the discussion above was captured in gifted and talented minority students' responses to the question of why they did not enroll in AP classes in their Seattle high school (Howard, 2002). Their replies included the following: “I didn't know I could,” (low expectations of teachers and counselors who did not recom-

mend these courses), "I didn't want to be alone" (negative ramifications of high achievement, such as social isolation), and "I don't want to fail" (low expectations of self).

Matching Programs to the Needs of Students

Robinson raises the issue that using alternative means to identify minority students as gifted has not met with success because the students are not appropriately matched to gifted programs, most of which emphasize verbal skills. I have had direct experience with this issue. We identified third-grade minority students for Project Excite, mentioned above, via the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test. We also collected the students' scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. We observed that we had students who had done fairly well on the NNAT, but their performance on an in-grade, standardized, nationally normed achievement test indicated that their verbal skills were low (even though the correlation between the NNAT scores and the ITBS reading scores was higher (.55) than the correlation between the NNAT scores and the ITBS math scores (.44) for our sample of 24 minority third graders). Our pattern of correlations was different than that reported by Naglieri for the relationship between the NNAT and the Stanford Achievement Test (.59 for reading and .68 for verbal; *NNAT Multilevel Technical Manual*, 1997). Robinson raises the issue of just what nonverbal ability tests, which have become popular as alternative ways to identify minority gifted student, do, in fact, measure? In contrast to the research Robinson presents, Naglieri (2002) reported that the NNAT is just as good a predictor of school achievement as more traditional ability tests. It appears, however, that Robinson is correct that these tests will not find children who are a good match to programs that primarily emphasize verbal skills, as do most current gifted programs. An important and unresolved question is, "Do they measure an intellectual ability that is important to measure and has meaning educationally?" I am not sure we know the definitive answer to that question; but, then again, there are many who question the validity of standard tests currently in widespread use.

And, most important, do we change programs to match the abilities we measure and identify, or do we beef up the verbal skills of minority children so they can succeed in traditional, verbally oriented gifted programs? I believe we should do both. I believe that, given the cultural factors that negatively affect minority children in our present society, getting those with potential for high achieve-

ment into programs as soon as possible, even if some students have skills deficiencies or uneven profiles, is important because we need to set high expectations for such students early, develop motivation, provide programs that inoculate students against negative peer influences, and deal directly with the cultural issues that affect minority students' achievement. This would include both low-income minority students and middle- and high-income minority students. At the same time, I think that skills they need to acquire, which they do not have for whatever reason, should be developed deliberately and systematically so that all opportunities remain open to these students. I also believe that programs that meet the needs of verbally talented students who can be identified through more traditional measures should be retained and that there is no reason to limit our programming to a single subject or domain.

In summary, I agree with Robinson that dismantling current, verbally focused gifted programs because they do not serve all gifted students is a cowardly way to appease people concerned about the achievement of minority students. I do believe that we should keep a strong focus on programs that strive very hard to identify minority kids with potential (even if we do not fully understand the nature of the potential at the present time) and provide them with programs that capitalize on their already developed abilities and develop those that they need, but that are currently underdeveloped.

Recently I read an article by Gary Howard (2002), "School Improvement for All: Reflections on the Achievement Gap," in which the author quoted a principal, John Morefield, who successfully closed the achievement gap in his Seattle public school:

I have come to believe that a school designed to work for children of color, works for White children. The reverse, however, is not true. Consequently, if we design schools to work for children of color, they will work for all children. (p. 14)

I suggest that we ponder the applicability of this statement to programs for the gifted.

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