

# Gifted Potential and Poverty: A Call for Extraordinary Action

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*Dr. Robinson's proposed action plan will serve the needs of highly achieving gifted students. However, defining giftedness as high academic performance based on traditional assessment procedures could reverse the field's fledgling success in supporting culturally diverse gifted children and youth. Changing the focus of equity in gifted education to economic representation will not decrease educators' responsibility to understand the learning needs of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students. Nevertheless, a focus on children of poverty with high potential is a worthy and achievable goal and will require extraordinary commitment.*

## Introduction

Professor Robinson's thesis, as summarized in the title of her paper, is correct: "Sacrificing the needs of academically gifted students does not solve society's unsolved problems." Districts that have chosen to deny services to highly achieving gifted students because of disproportionate enrollment by race unfairly disadvantage students with special educational needs even as they seek to be inclusive. The proposed action agenda would encourage schools to meet the needs of highly achieving gifted students by using traditional admissions testing and providing challenging, high-level academic classes.

Simultaneously, equity initiatives would shift focus from racial to socioeconomic diversity. Traditional assessment procedures would be supplemented by authentic measures, differentiation in regular classrooms, preparatory services, early intervention, and parent outreach. While the proposed action agenda would serve highly achieving students, more transformative strategies than these will be required to approach equity for gifted students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This latter goal will continue to require sensitivity to racial, language, and economic differences; changes in philosophy, definition, and assessment; and extraordi-

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nary interventions to enhance success. My response to the lead article focuses on transformations needed to increase economic diversity in gifted education. I begin with a critique of some of the premises of the action agenda and offer a different perspective on what is needed.

### A Critique of Premises

Several premises underlie Robinson's proposed action agenda. First, income level, not race, produces social inequality. Consequently, a shift of focus from race to income level will produce needed change. Third, however, the negative effects of poverty on children would reduce the proportion of economically disadvantaged children identified as gifted. Fourth, giftedness is best defined in terms of exceptionally high achievement and best identified by traditional referral and assessment processes.

#### *Does Race Have a Role in Producing Social Inequality?*

Achievement data show a strong, consistent relationship to socioeconomic status. Yet, evidence exists that societal responses to race may affect achievement independent of income level. Findings of the College Board's (1999) National Task Force on Minority High Achievement have particular relevance for our field.

Going back to the 1960s, there is an extensive body of research showing that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students at virtually all socioeconomic status 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 Task Force reported that, while intense poverty limits the presence of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students among the highest achievers, inadequate school resources, racial and ethnic prejudice, families' limited educational resources, and cultural differences contribute to underrepresentation. In the field of gifted education, racial and ethnic prejudice can take the form of lower expectations and referral bias (e.g., Peterson & Margolin, 1997) on the part of schools and students' internalization of historical oppression (e.g., Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Steele, 1997). Both economic sta-

tus and racial/ethnic bias affect services to gifted students, and reform efforts require recognition of both.

### *Will Shifting to Income Reduce Emphasis on Race?*

Increasing representation of low-income children and youth among students identified and served as gifted is an important goal. It is not clear, however, that achieving this goal would reduce the need to understand the effects of culture and language on learning. Data from the Bureau of Census (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2002) indicate that, of 11,633,000 children under age 18 living in poverty, only 4,222,000 (36.3%) are White, not Hispanic. Thus, the majority (63.7%) are children of color (3,526,000 are Black and 3,330,000 are Hispanic).

Further, 23% of all poor children residing in this country are either first- or second-generation immigrants (Capps, 2001). Nationwide, children of immigrants are more likely than children of natives to live in families who worry about affording food, share crowded housing, lack access to health insurance, and may be in fair or poor health (Capps). From these figures, we would expect a majority of economically disadvantaged gifted students to be children of color, and many of their families would have concerns with basic survival needs. Additionally, over one fifth may be immigrants or children of immigrants with a primary language other than English. The percentage would be higher in states with large concentrations of newcomers and high poverty rates for children (e.g., California, Texas, New York).

### *Will Poverty Produce Fewer Gifted Students?*

Robinson's discussion strongly suggests that shifting the focus of underrepresentation from race to economic status is not expected to result in parity. Children in poverty are "behind the eight ball from the moment of conception" (p. 253). "Fewer of the marginalized children will develop to the full measure of their potential or acquire advanced intellectual competencies and academic skills that are clearly ahead of the norm for their age" (p. 253). Use of traditional assessment scores, which, as Robinson contends, meaningfully reflect "that some children have been deprived of needed cognitive and academic sustenance" (p. 257), will necessarily result in disproportionately low numbers of children of poverty identified as gifted.

Yet, while the literature supports a relationship between poverty and school achievement, the relationship is complex and mediated

by a number of variables. Based on a review of selected, in-depth studies, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) concluded that the negative effects of poverty on IQ and achievement tests are more pronounced for children who experience poverty during the preschool and early school years and, especially, for children who live in extreme poverty or for multiple years. However, the effects of poverty on school attainment (years of schooling completed), while statistically significant, are small. "It is not yet possible to make conclusive statements regarding the size of the effects of poverty on children's long-term cognitive development" (p. 61). The authors hypothesize that, as children reach school age, school and community environments have increasing influence that may equal or outweigh the impact of family conditions. Yet, the home environment, including learning experiences in the home, accounts for 50% of the effect of income on cognitive ability. Taken together, these findings emphasize the potential of school, community, and parent interventions for improving achievement outcomes.

#### *Is Giftedness Best Defined as Exceptionally High Achievement?*

Definitional questions will be answered more by values than empirical data. Operationalizing giftedness as outstanding academic achievement is accepted by many in our field. Implicit is the assumption of academic achievement *in English* for students in this country. Achievement-based definitions fail to consider limited opportunities for some children to acquire the experiences necessary to demonstrate their potential on standardized verbal tests administered in English. As noted by Robinson, for children from economically impoverished backgrounds, opportunities to demonstrate high levels of academic achievement may be attenuated by insufficient nutrition, higher rates of health problems, amount and quality of learning experiences in the home, family dysfunction, and violent crime.

A definition of giftedness must address these children's strengths—which may be academic achievement for some and, for others, creativity, problem solving, or resilience and persistence in the face of adversity—demonstrated via verbal or other modalities. Historical and contemporary examinations of how cultures (Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Bundy, 2001) define giftedness reveal definitions as a reflection of societal values. Given the socially constructed nature of giftedness, the disproportionately low enrollment of low-income children in programs for the gifted stems from policies and procedures of our own creation (Borland, 1997). In recon-

structuring giftedness to address contemporary and future societal needs, we could emphasize and enhance, for example, learners' potential for balanced bilingualism and biliteracy, thus leveling the playing field for children, regardless of primary language. Defining academic achievement in terms of biliteracy could reframe how we view gifted English learners and change the structure, content, and outcomes of gifted education programs for all students (Castellano & Díaz, 2002, p. xx). According to Thomas and Collier (1997/98), "Students who graduate with monocultural perspectives will not be prepared to contribute to their societies, for cross-cultural contact is at an all-time high in human history as population mobility continues throughout the world" (p. 23).

*How Problematic Is the Use  
of Nontraditional Assessment Procedures?*

Robinson argues that nontraditional tests, such as visual-spatial measures, yield smaller racial differences, but assess different abilities than do verbal measures and are less predictive of high academic achievement. Underachieving children who score high on nonverbal measures would be inappropriately placed in classes designed for highly achieving students, would cause changes in the program detrimental to achieving students, or both.

Slocumb (2001, p. 9), writing about giftedness in poverty, has argued that, when we identify based on traditional measures alone, we identify opportunity, rather than giftedness. I would argue that some gifted students will be identified on the basis of traditional measures. For others, nontraditional assessment strategies will be required to identify gifted potential. While not a panacea for disproportionate representation, they are particularly useful for identifying gifted students who are English learners (Saccuzzo & Johnson, 1995)—a population disenfranchised by districts that rely on verbal measures of intelligence administered in English.

Yet, based on experience, I agree that some teachers could be overwhelmed by the challenges of meeting the different needs of lower achieving students from low-income families with a variety of language backgrounds and academically advanced, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking students—though all met the same standards on a nonverbal intelligence test. One solution would be to offer a range of programs to address the different needs of highly achieving gifted students (from all income levels) and less highly achieving children with high potential from poverty backgrounds.

### **Addressing Economic Diversity: What Will It Take?**

Robinson's discussion of the detrimental effects of poverty contains the seeds of a different, transformational approach: "In the ordinary course of events, they [children of poverty] will be underrepresented among academically gifted children" (p. 254). The key: move the ordinary course of events to the extraordinary. A growing literature on low-income gifted provides some indication of what it will take to increase the proportion of poor children among the highest achievers: inclusive assumptions, nontraditional assessment, challenging curricula, additional academic and emotional support, parent participation, and outcomes-based evaluation.

While not new, a comprehensive integration of these elements could provide the extraordinary experience needed for low-income students with high potential to manifest their strengths. Others have cogently and eloquently argued the need for nontraditional procedures to identify gifted potential among children from low-income and culturally diverse backgrounds (e.g., Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2000; Maker, 1996). Assumptions, challenging curricula, additional academic and emotional support, parent participation, and evaluation will be addressed briefly here.

#### *Assumptions Guided by Rational Optimism*

A first requisite would be a major change in premises and expectations: Children with high potential from all racial and economic groups can achieve at high levels. As one approach, the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement (College Board, 1999) called for educators at all levels to make a priority objective the equal representation of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans among the most academically successful students. It further recommended that policies be evaluated against this goal.

The task becomes one of designing programs that result in high outcomes. Educators would establish high outcomes and determine what it takes to achieve them, rather than assume that few children of poverty can succeed. While goals for K-12 schools must include academic achievement, they also should address needs for long-term success: resiliency, positive coping skills, and self-efficacy. Expected outcomes should include completing college; entering a profession; providing leadership; and becoming a productive, contributing, well-adjusted world citizen.

*Challenging, Nonremedial Curricula*

Borland et al. (2000) identified transitional services as a critical component in helping students with gifted potential manifest their abilities and succeed in classrooms for the gifted. Given the typical 4 to 7 years required for development of academic English (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000), a transitional program is especially important for English learners. Such support is critical for economically disadvantaged English learners, as poverty and its attendant variables (availability of language models, books in the home, parent education level) affect development of English proficiency (Hakuta et al.). Instruction should integrate research-supported strategies for English language development; literacy, biliteracy, or both; and content acquisition in ways that challenge gifted thinking and encourage students' interests.

*Additional Academic and Emotional Support*

Based on their national study of services for gifted students from culturally diverse, low-income backgrounds, or both, VanTassel-Baska, Patton, and Prillaman (1989) called for additional opportunities beyond those provided to advantaged gifted students. The authors noted that, while at-risk gifted learners share commonalities with all gifted learners, they differ in significant ways and may benefit from additional services, such as tutoring, mentoring, and counseling. Beyond high potential, successful learning depends on children's self-efficacy beliefs and parents' academic expectations for their children, especially among low-income families (Sternberg et al., 2001). Gifted immigrant children and their families may require special services to address linguistic and cultural differences; economic and health factors; and stress from culture shock, intergenerational conflict, confusion about expectations, mistrust of authority regarding immigrant status, and effects of any trauma encountered during migration (Harris, 1991).

*Parent Participation*

Parents and families are among the most important influences on children's academic performance, particularly in families most at risk for school failure based on poverty. Parent factors contributing to academic performance vary by racial or ethnic group and income level (Desimone, 1999; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Rosenzweig, 2001). Interventions with potentially gifted students from low-income backgrounds consistently identify the extent of parent inter-

est in children's schooling and support of learning at home as critical factors in their children's success (Borland, et al., 2000; Shumow, 1997). Others identified by the general parent participation literature include parents' educational aspirations for their children, parenting approach, emotional support, and participation in school. Parent programs addressing specific learning strategies (e.g., monitoring homework, tutoring, reducing television time, supporting development of good study habits, and high expectations) appear most likely to have positive effects on children's academic performance (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998).

### *Evaluation*

Careful evaluation of programs for gifted students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds is critical in determining the most effective strategies for meeting the needs of this population. VanTassel-Baska et al. (1989) found few program evaluations that include valid student impact data. Evaluating impact may require the use of more authentic and informal measures, as standardized tests do not adequately assess progress of culturally diverse and English learners. Achievement in English is affected by the opportunity to develop literacy in the primary language, duration of exposure to English language instruction, and the context of instruction (e.g., high expectations, the valuing of students' primary language and culture; De Avila, 1997). In evaluating programs for low-income gifted students, House and Lapan (1994) recommended the use of authentic assessment, multiple indicators, and qualitative as well as quantitative data to examine outcomes not likely to be discovered through standardized measures. They also urged implementation of longitudinal studies and cost-benefit analysis.

### **An Illustrative Case of Extraordinary Services**

One example of a promising program is Open Gate (Fox, 2001), designed to serve highly gifted students from low-income families by integrating the identified elements. The program consists of four classrooms serving highly gifted students from third to fifth grade. Teachers are certified as educators of the gifted by the district. Students qualify for enrollment by scoring a minimum of 99.6 percentile on the Raven Progressive Matrices using local norms and meeting federal criteria for free or reduced lunch. Classrooms are located in two elementary schools in a large, highly diverse urban

school district. Children are overwhelmingly culturally and linguistically diverse, with over half identified as English learners. Not surprisingly, when they enter Open Gate at third grade, their achievement varies widely. For example, one class of 20 students had Stanford Achievement Test total reading percentiles of 13 (English learner) to 96 (English fluent) and total math of 9 (English learner) to 99 (English fluent). The major program goal is to raise these percentiles to 80 or above by the end of grade five. Parent level of education ranges from elementary to some college. Some parents are not literate in their home language or in English and are unable to help children with homework in English.

Each classroom offers a challenging literacy- and standards-based curriculum with instructional activities varying by individual teacher. Teachers characterize the students as having limited experiences and an eagerness to learn, high-level thinking skills, and high achievement in mathematics. The English learners also exhibit difficulty with English vocabulary, idioms, spelling, comprehension, and expression. Given these characteristics, teachers assess prior knowledge and build common experience through field trips and other types of experiential learning. They challenge children's thinking, provide one-to-one support in expressing "fabulous" ideas, and use a range of strategies and materials for making content comprehensible. They also take care in asking children to share home experiences, as a child may feel anguish or embarrassment concerning family issues, such as an incarcerated parent.

Additional services include in-class tutoring in English reading/language arts, more extensive assessment for students with suspected disabilities, support for transportation, and direct support and referral to social services. Tutors are primarily undergraduate college students matched by language, culture, and gender to the Open Gate students. Referral is the major strategy to connect families to social services. However, Open Gate has provided direct assistance as needed to maintain students in the program. Examples include preventing homelessness by locating housing and finding donors to pay the first month's rent, providing resources for needed medical treatment, and having tutors serve as translators for families at health clinics and other agencies.

A new component is a parent program designed to enhance understanding of the curriculum and to facilitate families' support of children at home. Again, the program requires extraordinary services: the teacher presents to parents in English, followed by translations via tutors in Spanish, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Lao. While the district provides the teachers and classrooms as part of its regu-

lar services for gifted students, the additional support comes from a combination of state and private foundation grants.

Evaluating the program against its stated goal of attaining 80 percentile in reading and mathematics within 3 years appears simple. First-year results (Fox, 2001) have suggested that the goal is attainable. However, teachers expressed concern that standardized tests do not capture children's growth in high-level thinking and problem solving. Funding agencies' requests for comparative data using control groups have proven problematic. A control group of similarly qualified children is easily identifiable, as some families decline to participate in Open Gate. However, differences in desire to participate mark these groups as different in motivation. Moreover, gaining consent from the declining families to participate in evaluation studies is difficult. Even reaching families participating in Open Gate can be complicated by phones lines disconnected for lack of payment and the need to develop trust to obtain accurate information. An additional evaluation challenge is to measure the impact on short-term achievement and long-term career attainment of such interventions as enabling a child's surgery to correct severe scoliosis or keeping a family off the streets.

This case illustrates several important points. First, extraordinary services are possible for meeting the unique needs of gifted students from low-income homes. Second, it suggests that a comprehensive, qualitatively different program may be unattainable through regular classroom differentiation or provision of after-school and summer programs. Third, comprehensive services may require extraordinary commitment to garner resources through public and private sources.

## **Conclusions**

There is no question that students identified by traditional means, who are highly achieving, and who cannot be appropriately served in the general education classroom should receive challenging curricula designed for their unique needs. By the same token, given the far-reaching nature of poverty and its concomitant problems, gifted students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds would benefit from qualitatively different services designed to meet their unique needs. Shifting the focus of equity in gifted programs to income will not reduce our obligation to understand and address the learning needs of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse children. In fact, such a change would require acknowledgement of the

potential of all children to succeed and a commitment to extraordinary interventions to ensure their high achievement.

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