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Eliminating Barriers for English Language Learners in Gifted and Talented Programs in the U.S.

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper investigated the underrepresentation of English Language Learners (ELLs) in Gifted and Talented (GT) Programs in K-5 settings across U.S. states. Nationally, only 1.5% of ELLs are enrolled in GT programs, with several states below that average (OELA, 2021). Schools often rely on achievement tests as a basis for recommending students for GT programs, usually during 2nd grade (Coronado & Lewis, 2017). However, several factors, including the fairness of evaluation tools used, may preclude or exclude a student from being considered for GT programs. Other factors include what definitions and guidelines were used to determine *giftedness*, specifically those whose first language is not English. Other factors include the demographics of states, their resources for ELLs, and whether they follow local or national guidelines for recommending GT services. According to Arundel (2021) finding equitable identification practices using multiple data points (MDPs) and using differentiation in instruction and assessment can help shift the underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs at the elementary level and even benefit the retention of English Language Learners in these programs.

Keywords: English Language Learners (ELLs), Gifted and Talented Programs (GT), underrepresentation, giftedness, achievement testing, identification practices, differentiation, multiple data points (MDPs)

Chapter One: Introduction

An increase in the English Language Learner (ELL) population, specifically in elementary public schools in the United States in recent years, has not been met with a proportional increase in the number of ELLs being identified and enrolled in K-5 Gifted and Talented (GT) programs (Coronado & Lewis, 2017). According to the 1971 Marland Report to Congress which established policies around Gifted and Talented programs in public education, the identified gifted population in schools should be representative of the total student population and any subgroups, including ELLs. The target percentage of gifted students is 5% to 7% of the total student population in a school or district. These recommendations at the federal level along with guidelines and mandates established by state and local educational agencies help to promote equal access to services in public education for all student groups, including achievement-based programs such as GT.

Before 2017 in Texas, a state with a high number of ELLs in urban districts (26.6% of the total student population are ELLs), the average percentage of ELLs in GT programs at the elementary level was 3.01% (Coronado & Lewis, 2017). Since 2018, 25 states have had higher enrollment rates of ELLs in GT programs than the national average of 1.5% (OELA, 2021). Minnesota and Texas ranked the highest among other states at 5.7% and 8% of ELLs in GT programs, respectively (OELA, 2021). However, in the remaining 25 U.S. states, the percentage of ELLs in GT programs was under the previously mentioned recommendation of 5% to 7%. For example, Ohio had the lowest rate or proportionality with only 0.1% of ELLs in GT programs (OELA 2021).

It is important to investigate the underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs in schools across the U.S. because public education must be equitable for all students. The decrease in non-

ELLs to ELLs enrolled in GT programs as of 2021 is disproportionate and is affected by the states that have less than the recommended 5% representation of a student population enrolled in GT programming. In Minnesota where I teach students of all backgrounds and language abilities, the percentage of ELLs in GT programs is higher (5.7%) than the national average (1.5%), but many other states have disproportionate numbers of ELLs in GT programs, creating barriers for ELLs based on where students live and the current and sometimes inconsistent practices each state or district uses.

The identification of ELLs as gifted students differs from state to state, and sometimes from district to district. Generally, schools follow local state statutes or local district policies around GT programming. Inconsistent practices in the identification of students for GT programs in elementary schools across different states can create barriers and inequity for some students, including ELLs. Eliminating those barriers can lead to academic prosperity for a growing number of ELLs. Without access to gifted programming, many of these students may not reach their full potential as learners. Exploring the disproportionality of ELLs in elementary GT programs will help inform the field of education on the state of current identification practices and be a call to find and implement other representational methods for ELLs in other educational programs (such as AP classes at the secondary level).

The scope of this analysis is to address what variables exist within school districts, including demographics and identification practices of *giftedness* and other observational and assessment tools used that might lead to ELLs being underrepresented in elementary GT programs. Furthermore, this investigation will provide a framework for how a public educational system might address and eliminate the disparities in their state's GT programs.

To explain variables that lead to lower enrollment of ELLs in GT programs versus non-ELLs in GT programs at the elementary level, some key terms will be highlighted and discussed such as *giftedness, identification, achievement testing, and differentiation.*

One of the most significant developments in identifying special programming for gifted students was the first definition of *giftedness* offered by the federal government. It proposed that *giftedness* was manifested in six distinct areas—general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability (Marland, 1971) and was directly related to a need for specialized programming in schools. Twenty years later, Callahan et al. (1995) found that nearly 50% of surveyed school districts based their gifted education identification procedures on this definition, making it the most popular definition at the time. Since this survey in 1995, standardized *achievement tests* and nonverbal assessments have also frequently been used as *identification practices* for enrollment in GT programs at the elementary level. Providing more equal access begins with acknowledging all students' cognitive abilities, including non-language-based abilities.

In Minnesota elementary schools where the percentage of ELLs in GT programs is higher than the national average (1.5%) and between the 5% - 7% recommendation, (5.7%), the process of identifying GT learners relies on the use of the CogAT achievement test that is often given in 2nd grade (Coronado & Lewis, 2017). According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2021), achievement tests should be used in conjunction with subjective assessment tools. Some school districts in Minnesota use observational tools along with ability, performance, and growth data. According to the Waconia Schools definition of *gifted learners* in their schools, some common characteristics that many gifted individuals share outside of test scores are unusual

alertness, even in infancy; learning rapidly, putting thoughts together quickly; excellent memory; an unusually large vocabulary; and abstract, complex, logical, and insightful thinking (Waconia Schools, 2024). School districts in the U.S. are beginning to see the value in establishing local norms, even at the building level, to determine who their gifted and talented students are, rather than using national or state comparisons (Arundel, 2021).

Are gifted and talented programs accessible to English language learners under current identification practices across the United States at the elementary level and what supports exist for ELLs once they are in GT programs to promote success? To explain how public education can help eliminate barriers for ELLs in accessing GT programs at the elementary level, this work will outline what research has been done to increase ELLs in GT programs, as well as how previous policies or practices have already been and might be further revised. Finally, this work will highlight research on how *differentiation* strategies allow for higher enrollment and retention of ELL students in GT programs across elementary schools nationwide (Arundel, 2021).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The underrepresentation of English Language Learners in Gifted and Talented services in schools across the U.S. is the focus of a variety of research. This work will present quantitative (e.g. reports, test scores) and qualitative (e.g. interviews, grounded theories of identification practices) research in the field of gifted education to highlight the status and trends of equitable access to gifted services in public education, specifically for ELLs in elementary grades.

The National Association of Gifted Children (2018, 2022) published survey research including state practice data and feedback for many local, state, and federal educational systems on the status of gifted services in public education. Their findings include an analysis of how mandates and accountability (or the lack thereof) play a role in the access to gifted services across the U.S. Literature on gifted education acknowledges that advanced programming for students is not consistently mandated or reported in the U.S. and demonstrates awareness of the disparities in minority student representation.

The shift in the literature on gifted education is now focused on discovering what student groups are underrepresented in GT and why they are underrepresented. Additionally, researchers are examining what variables exist within school districts, demographics, and identification practices in GT programs while also analyzing practices that may result in closing the disparity gaps between non-ELs and ELs (Card & Guilani, 2016 & Carmen et. al., 2018).

Identification Practices in Gifted and Talented Programs

According to the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) (2022), there is no federal mandate to identify or serve gifted students in the United States, so it is up to states and local education agencies (LEAs) to determine and provide gifted education services in public schools across the nation. The lack of mandates at the federal level leads to state education

agencies (SEAs) often defining general giftedness and the identification practices for GT programs at the elementary level for their schools. However, the NAGC (2022) reported in their 2020-2021 State of the States Report that 10 states did not have any sort of state mandate for GT identification. By contrast, several states such as Minnesota established state standards for GT identification practices. According to the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA, 2021), Minnesota ranks in the top 5 states in ELL representation in GT programs nationwide, with 5.7% of ELLs in GT. The 2023 Minnesota Statute 120B.15 Gifted and Talented Student Programs and Services states: School districts must adopt guidelines for assessing and identifying students for participation in gifted and talented programs. These guidelines should include the use of assessments and procedures that are valid, reliable, fair, and based on current theory and research. Assessments and procedures should be sensitive to underrepresented groups, including, but not limited to, low-income, minority, twice-exceptional, and English learners (Minnesota Legislature, 2023). Minnesota is an example of a state where mandated guidelines for GT services, screened assessments for fairness and reliability, and initiatives targeting access for underrepresented groups have contributed to an increase in ELLs in GT programs across school districts in the state.

Defining Giftedness

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002) provides the federal definition of gifted and talented:

> The term ‘gifted and talented,’ when used concerning students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or specific academic fields,

> and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school to fully develop those capabilities.

The NAGC published its 2020-2021 State of the States Report as a qualitative report to "provide consistency and continuity" due to variables in how each U.S. state identifies and serves GT learners (p. 11). The report's findings show that more than half of U.S. states have SEAs that put forth mandates or strong recommendations for identifying gifted learners. Most U.S. states (except for 10 states) also publish a list of approved assessments and evaluative tools to use for the referral and screening process. Their findings also show that only seven states required a universal screening process for referral for identification, 23 states indicated a universal screening process is not required, and 30 states indicated that their LEAs determine if there is a universal screening process. The universal screening process is often designed by LEAs such as school districts or even independent schools that involve all students in one or more regular classes or grades, often using local norms established in the process. Local norms help educators compare what students know and can do with the work of other students who have had similar learning opportunities (Card & Giuliani, 2016). Universal screenings and local norms for GT identification have become more widespread pathways in identifying GT learners. These newer pathways counter the traditional models of "picking and choosing" students through exclusive referral systems or standardized test score comparisons at a national level. However, LEAs who establish norms for identifying gifted learners are not always held accountable for meeting what the SEA mandates or federal guidelines are. For example, some local districts may recommend or mandate new pathways that include screening all underrepresented groups to expand the identification and enrollment of these students in GT programs while other local districts within the same state may not have the same accountability with fewer or no guidelines to follow.

Accountability

The NAGC's 2020-2021 State of the States Report details the percentage of identified gifted students who were also English Learners. Their report findings show that Kansas ranked the lowest among U.S. states with 0% of ELLs in GT programs and New Mexico ranked the highest with 15.61%. These varying ranges of ELL representation in GT programs are due to the limited accountability in reporting student identification data and a lack of screening guidelines in over one-third of U.S. states (NAGC, 2022).

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandated that states collect, and report achievement data disaggregated by student sub-group at each achievement level, including advanced levels. The 2015 ESSA also ensured Title II funds to address the learning needs of all students including GT (NAGC, 2015). However, 14 U.S. states responded that they did not collect this type of data despite the existence of such a federal mandate. The lack of data about student subgroups does not allow education leaders at the local, state, and federal levels to receive accurate information and to take necessary steps to eliminate the underrepresentation of student groups in GT programming.

According to the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) (2021), there has been a decrease of 2% in non-ELL students in GT programs while ELLs in GT programs have dropped by 17%. This rate of decrease was the highest among all subgroups of students, followed by Black and Indigenous students (OELA, 2021). The OELA is a subdivision of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, established in 1968. The quantitative survey research conducted by the OELA collects data on key education and civil rights issues in the nation's public schools. Most student data are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, sex, English learner (EL) status, and disability status. One explanation for the downward trend in the data of

ELL underrepresentation in GT programs is the (lack of) accountability provided by local, state, and federal education agencies. Of the 51 states (including the District of Columbia) surveyed, only 31 respondents reported that their SEAs or LEAs required reporting on gifted and talented education programs and services in their schools (NAGC, 2022). A lack of accountability across state and federal agencies combined with narrow conceptions of giftedness and biased human decision-making processes present barriers to placing ELLs in gifted programs (Gubbins et. al., 2020).

Although identification practices vary by state, many states and local districts are transparent about their practices in screening their students in public elementary schools. Often, local districts will publish on their websites information about how they identify gifted learners and then implement or embed advanced curricula or services (Card & Giuliani, 2016). One common tool for the identification of gifted learners is achievement testing. Achievement tests determine what the students already have learned and if they are more advanced than their grade level. In the Gubbins et. al. (2020) mixed method study, researchers examined how district-level identification procedures can include a variety of instruments and tools to gather student information, including achievement tests, aptitude tests, and group testing.

Achievement Tests as Assessment Tools for GT Program Selection

The Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) achievement test is one of the two most common identification screening assessments used among U.S. states in identifying students as gifted (Coronado & Lewis, 2017 & Carmen et. al., 2018). According to Lohman (2011), the CogAT7 test was designed to reduce group differences among diverse student populations. It contains three subtests: Matrices, Figure Classification, and Paper Folding at the kindergarten level (Lohman, 2011). A quantitative study by Carman et al. (2018) examined the relationship

between demographic variables and performance on the CogAT achievement test. Specifically, this study analyzed a subtest of the CogAT screening test known as the CogAT7, a nonverbal battery test administered to students in Kindergarten - 1st grade, that measures cognitive ability. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (2015) calls for the use of nonverbal tests as part of their standards for student identification to ensure each student is assessed with "non-biased and equitable approaches" (p. 10). Achievement tests such as the CogAT7 are not universally provided to elementary schools across the U.S., but research suggests that it is a more reliable measurement of student intelligence, not directly assessing language or cultural assimilation.

Researchers in the Carman et al. (2018) study performed a quantitative data analysis on CogAT 7 scores of kindergarten students from a very large urban school district in Texas with a high ELL population. They measured four variables in their demographic study: % of students on free/reduced lunch, % of students who are ELLs, % of students who are a minority group, and % of students who meet or exceed satisfactory scores on standardized tests (Carman et al., 2018, p. 4). This study aimed to examine the variance in how underrepresented groups are identified for gifted services starting in kindergarten using the CogAT7 as a statistical source.

Participants of the Carman et. al. (2018) study were assigned because they were kindergarten students of the local district chosen based on its diverse demographics, across 173 elementary schools, for 15,724 students. Finally, the researchers of this study describe the limitations of their study beginning with the sample population used. The use of only one school district as a sample group, despite its diverse demographics, may not correspond with other districts across the state that have different demographics and use other screening assessments for gifted programming. Another limitation the researchers describe in the article is the reliability

of the screening assessment CogAT7 at the kindergarten level. Older age groups tend to have more reliable scores so measuring younger age groups may produce less reliable scores to analyze (Carman et al., 2018). Despite these limitations, this research provides evidence that school districts that use comprehensive assessment tools such as the CogAT7 can get more specific data on how to appropriately provide challenging programs to develop the talents of students who exceed the cognitive and academic development of their peers. Additionally, schools at the local level can ensure greater equity by being more accurate as to who students' peers are and who may or may not have the same opportunities.

Based on the Carman et. al. (2018) study, measuring the fairness of an assessment tool is a common research inquiry in gifted identification research. Analyzing the validity, reliability, and equitable access to these screening tools such as the CogAT7, is how SEAs and LEAs can determine test bias or lack of opportunity for some students. Testing students in elementary school for gifted services is not consistently done or reliable in some U.S. states where mandates are not clear or don't exist. Some efforts by education researchers go beyond mitigating opportunity gaps and, instead, are focused on improving identification systems such as reducing assessment error and bias. According to Peters (2022), a fair test will yield essentially equal observed scores and the same valid inferences in the presence of equal true scores. This means that regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or other factors in a student population, the outcomes should be proportionate. Peters (2022) argued that one cause of disproportionality in test scores reported from achievement tests, specifically standardized tests, was assessment bias or that some children do not have the opportunity to develop their talents at the same rate due to discrimination and language deficits.

The abundance of assessment tools (and their validity) and differing identification practices for gifted programming nationwide complicates how students are measured on talent and academic and cognitive skills and whether they even get the chance to show their capabilities beyond a test score. While assessments that rely on scoring students can indicate some measures of intelligence and cognitive skill, research findings prove that many underrepresented students are asked to take a test but do not receive the learning experiences or do not receive them at the same rate as their peers.

Underrepresentation in Gifted and Talented Programs

Students served through English language learner programs and students who are from low-income households are disproportionately underrepresented in GT programs (Peters, 2022). Peters suggested a few factors for this underrepresentation in his qualitative study on the challenges of achieving equity in gifted programs. First, poorly designed identification systems in education combined with larger issues of societal inequality create bias and fewer opportunities to be represented. Second, diverse populations exist in schools today, however, these diverse populations live in different places where gifted education services are not always widely available, or their programs do not place an evident focus on or even show an awareness of an underrepresentation of ELLS in GT nationwide. Furthermore, the intersectionality of ethnicity/race, education, family income, geography and the degree to which an individual feels welcome and represented in a particular community are factors that contribute to both academic achievement outcomes and gifted identification.

Advocacy and Cultural Capital

Cultural and linguistic differences can affect social integration. Advocacy for equitable educational opportunities is challenging for students and their families who do not "have" *cultural capital,* often those from low-income and minority families (Mikus et. al., 2020). The term *cultural capital* coined by Bourdieu (1986) is when people use their consumption and knowledge of culture (e.g. visiting the theatre, classical concerts, or museum) to advocate for themselves or promote their success or influence. According to Mikus et. al. (2020), cultural capital is also the ability and frequency with which parents or families promote and advocate for their child's education by exposing them to cultural activities and a middle-class perspective of education. Mikkus et. al (2020) argue that students can convert that cultural capital gained from their parents' advocacy and exposure to cultural activities into academic success and recognition, including GT program selection. While cultural capital is the consumption and knowledge of culture, Mikkus et. al shows it is less likely to contribute to children's skill development than productive cultural activities (e.g. reading, taking lessons in visual or performing arts). In any case, providing the opportunity for acquiring cultural knowledge to children, specifically in K-5 grades, has shown an effect on academic recognition in school. The 2014-2015 State of the States Report (NAGC, 2015) indicated that the most common time for gifted identification to occur was following a parent or teacher referral, confirming that parental advocacy plays a role in the selection of student populations in GT programs. This influence is even more evident at the elementary grade levels where students are more likely to be recommended by parents and teachers, relying on more subjective methods of assessing their giftedness, as well as their academic potential and skills. Hispanic students, including ELLs, are "underreferred" in the traditional parent/teacher referral system (Card & Giuliano, 2016).

Differential rates of achievement occur when students do not experience or learn at the same rate or at the same time. As a result of larger, systemic issues in American society, learning experiences outside of the classroom create differences in opportunities to develop skills in science and reading (Peters, 2022). In a quantitative analysis, Card and Giuliano (2016) found that a system in which all students are screened or considered for gifted identification would remove parental advocacy as a component in the identification process, resulting in a far more equitable selection of students. Limitations in the Peters (2022) and Card and Giuliano (2016) studies are the scale of the sample sizes. The two studies consider the gifted identification process only at the school district level and do not reflect on how their findings can be expanded to SEAs and how student advocacy can be propelled to close the gap at a federal level.

Finally, English Language Learners experience dilemmas with the use of labels and socio-political influences in a school setting. ELLs, including those identified as gifted learners, face pressures to assimilate into a language and/or culture. According to a narrative research study by Lopez-Kershen (2016), cultural assimilation and academic giftedness have opposing definitions or labels of “becoming similar” and “different than normal”, respectively. Students who are measured “against” their peers for how well they integrate but how they also might differ academically create a dichotomy that many students from diverse backgrounds face in education today. Lopez-Kershen also suggested that education should embrace the capacities of all children. A limitation of her study is the familiar narrative style that does not include enough citations of sources on how cultural assimilation pressures impact education. Nevertheless, her narrative as an educator and a parent shows how educators and parents can change what they do to offer all students entrance into the content that is taught and offered in advanced programming.

Differentiated Strategies for GT Program Selection and Retention

Universal Screening

According to a mixed method study by Gubbins et. al. (2020), the underrepresentation of ELs in Gifted and Talented can be addressed using universal screening and other inclusive local and state-wide pathways for identifying diverse gifted learners. The use of educator interviews and focus group data allowed the study's research team to find emergent themes to examine and compare for their findings. The elementary schools selected in this study represented three different states from different regions in the U.S. (Southeast, South, and Midwest). All schools selected had a "proportionate ratio of ELLs in GT programs (.9 or higher)" (p. 344). The total number of schools in this study was 16 schools within nine districts. All students identified for GT programs in these 16 schools were identified by Grade 5, including ELLs.

The goal of the research team was to show how an established universal screening process (across multiple states) led to proportional numbers of ELLs in GT programs. The established universal screening process included three categories: Cognitive Ability/Intelligence Tests, Achievement Tests, and Rating Scales (p. 348). Advocacy, proactive searches for students of promise, and flexibility in applying criteria were important components of the process to ensure districts did not overlook students.

Some limitations of the Gubbins et al. (2020) study noted by the researchers included the small sample size used, the small size of the research team, and the oral design and implementation of interviews and focus groups. Also, variables among the schools, including why some districts in the same region or state did not follow the same universal screening practices were not fully explained. Despite some limitations, this study explained how universal screening has brought success in the identification of ELLs in GT programs in some districts

across the U.S. but does not provide significant action steps for promoting these findings across all states, including rural areas and states such as Ohio that rank lowest in the ratio of proportionality of ELLs in GT programs (0.1%).

A quantitative study by Card & Giuliano (2016) examined how universal screening also increased the representation of low-income, minority students, ELLs, and girls who are all disproportionally represented in gifted education. An explanation for the underrepresentation of these population groups in GT programs is that standard processes for identifying gifted students are based largely on the referral of parents and teachers, which tends to miss qualified students who are from underrepresented groups. Their study compared the fraction of students identified as gifted by the end of 3rd grade in one large urban school district spanning seven years, from 2004 – 2011. The student demographics compared in the diverse Florida school district included Females, Whites, Black, Hispanic, Asian, ELLs, FRL (Free/Reduced Lunch), and Parents Who Speak English (PWSE). Two main groups were identified Plan A students (non-ELLs, non-FRL) and Plan B students (ELLs, FRL). The study found that after implementing universal screening, the impact for Black, Hispanic, and ELLs (many labeled as Plan B students) was very large. The odds rose by 118% for Plan B students to be identified as gifted, while the impact for Whites was relatively small at 12%. These findings show that universal screening aids in closing the persistent gap between ELLs and non-ELLs in GT programs.

Before universal screening recommendations, some states such as Florida had state laws in the early 2000s mandated that students must achieve a minimum of 130 points on a standard IQ test to qualify for testing or screening for gifted services. Universal screening in some Florida school districts was introduced in spring 2005 as discussed in the Card & Giuliano (2016) study. In the last 10 years, other large Florida school districts such as Miami-Dade County Public

Schools, have added flexible and inclusive identification practices for underrepresented students that do not simply rely on IQ tests in English or parent referrals. In Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students that have achieved a grade of A or B in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or home language arts (i.e., Spanish language arts, Haitian-Creole language arts) and mathematics are screened for gifted automatically. This method of referring ELLs to GT programs eliminates language barriers by recognizing the academic achievement of those students in other content areas such as mathematics and content knowledge assessed in their home language or at their English proficiency level. However, the percentage of ELLs in GT programs since 2018 in Florida is only 0.5%, less than the national average of 1.5% (OELA, 2021). One hypothesis is that Florida does not require all its school districts to use a universal screening process for identifying GT learners. Only seven states are required to use the universal screening process for referral for identification, nine states require it for identification, and 23 states, including Florida, indicated that a universal screening process is not required (Rinn et. al., 2022). The proportionality rates of ELLs in GT programs are negatively impacted by a low number of states requiring the implementation of more favorable identification practices such as universal screening.

Universal screening, otherwise known as universal consideration, has been used in many academic program selection processes including for college admissions. Harradine et al. (2014) described through a mixed methods study, how teacher observations impact the selection of students in an admissions process. The study explores using universal teacher observations and rating scales such as Using Science, Talents, and Abilities to Recognize Students—Promoting Learning for Under-Represented Students (USTARS-PLUS) and Teacher Observation of Potential in Students (TOPS) and its role in providing equitable access in the college admission

process. Similarly, in gifted education, having teachers rate all students using these comprehensive observational tools, can help avoid the errors that result from selective teacher ratings (when only some students are rated) and reduce some potential rater bias through the inclusion of a structured rubric (Peters, 2022). It is important to note that the Harradine et. al. (2014) study focuses primarily on a college admissions process rather than on GT programs in elementary public schools. However, both Peters (2022) and Harradine et. al. (2014) suggest that teachers play a significant role in the gifted identification process and that using comprehensive and unbiased tools such as rating scales, rubrics, and universal screenings, can result in more underrepresented students being selected rather than overlooked.

Dual-Language Programming

In the field of gifted education, there is a growing myth that gifted kids will make it on their own or "achieve above their peers" despite not receiving GT programming or continuous support throughout their GT curriculum (Peters, 2022). Too often, cutting gifted services is seen as an equitable approach to reducing the achievement gap between majority and minority groups in public education. School district officials may think they are mitigating inequalities by reducing their advanced course offerings when they are more likely to have the opposite effect (Peters, 2022). Increasing equity within gifted and talented programs should start with reframing what it means to be gifted and then screening all students who might benefit from advanced learning opportunities.

Local norms such as establishing dual-language programs are solutions to providing more inclusiveness in a school or throughout an entire school district. This inclusiveness in each school building sends "a powerful message that there are gifted kids in every school, not just in wealthy schools in the suburbs" (Peters, 2022). Using building norms may represent an easier

path to improving equity though it may not yet lead to the elimination of underrepresentation of minority groups in public education.

From pre-kindergarten to upper elementary grades (grades 5/6), the most common gifted program service delivery models were reported as differentiation in the general education classroom, pull-out programs, subject-matter acceleration, and cluster classrooms (NAGC, 2022). Since 2020, several school districts in Illinois expanded their GT services (rather than limiting or cutting them) in their elementary school in a culturally responsive manner. Due to larger ELL populations, one major district in Illinois now offers dual-language gifted services. Although dual-language gifted services are not a common offering across U.S. schools, the recognition that the ELL population is on the rise and all students deserve equal access to educational services, dual-language offerings can provide schools with a newer GT curriculum and perspective.

Frontloading

Schools and educators face challenges in resources, staffing, and funding across elementary schools in the U.S., including in GT programming. According to Peters (2022), only 27 percent of school districts in Illinois offered gifted programs since 2016. This means that more than 30,000 high-ability students in Illinois lack access to the educational programming that they need to reach their potential. Illinois does not mandate gifted and talented services at the state level. However, some schools are exploring new ways to help combat the gaps in GT services from urban to rural to suburban. The Illinois school district in the Peters (2022) study implemented an Access to Inquiry and Meaning (AIM) program in targeted buildings (more percentage of ELLs) to develop the potential in students who have not yet had opportunities to do so. The AIM program consists of weekly thinking skills lessons in targeted second and third-

grade classrooms to develop student potential through “frontloading” so that more students will benefit from advanced coursework later. Frontloading involves gifted and talented resource specialists challenging students who, often because of a privileged upbringing, are under-challenged while at the same time, developing the potential of less-privileged students to close equity gaps (Peters, 2022).

As an asset-based approach, frontloading moves educators away from deficit thinking and focuses on proactively teaching skills that will challenge all students through a rigorous and scaffolded curriculum. Frontloading allows educators to support equity and excellence in academic contexts by giving students the opportunities to learn that their home life or socioeconomic status doesn’t permit them to experience (Meyer et. al., 2024). Carmen et. al. (2018) discussed the importance of ensuring students’ gaps in the opportunity to learn would not predetermine student success once enrolled in their GT programs. Front loading is a form of intensive coaching and support to improve an underrepresented student’s academic skills and achievement before being entered into gifted programming. This form of targeted teaching can result in alleviating some of the lack of opportunity to learn for students who are underserved in gifted programs.

Several pathways to eliminating barriers or opportunity gaps have been identified in research studies related to GT programs in the U.S. However, asset-based thinking and strategies such as frontloading have lacked a significant presence in professional development for teachers. The Meyer et. al. (2024) qualitative study does an empirical review of the literature on reducing excellence gaps. Her team concluded that in-service teacher training that focuses only on strategies to bring students up to grade-level standards neglects the needs of students who have the potential to perform at advanced levels and only partially prepares teachers for their job

duties. Despite needing more professional development to reduce excellence gaps (e.g. the underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs), several school districts have implemented local initiatives such as Project Excite in Illinois. The program was an example of frontloading because it offered early acceleration opportunities and enriched supplemental programming to prepare 14 cohorts of high-potential third through eighth-grade students from diverse backgrounds for advanced learning opportunities in high school and beyond. After completing the program, Project Excite participants also had higher rates of advanced math course placement, enrollment in 4-year colleges (84.5%), and admission to selective colleges (27.6%). These findings highlight the fact that frontloading can pave the way for secondary and postsecondary talent development opportunities. However, retention and success in GT programs and accelerated coursework require multiple facets, including early intervention (third grade), sustained support (through eighth grade), and consideration of nonacademic factors (parent engagement).

One limitation of the Meyer et. al. (2024) study included the use of only one online database of journals and published works for the synthesis of the literature on reducing excellence gaps. This review explored pathways to reducing excellence gaps and showed a shift in the research toward more effective professional development for teachers and using asset-based thinking and frontloading strategies in screening and retaining underrepresented groups in GT programs.

Flexible Ability Grouping

Flexible ability grouping is a differentiation strategy implemented in many classrooms across elementary schools in the U.S. This type of grouping differs from “tracking” in that the across-class or within-class grouping configurations are based on students’ current academic

needs and placement can be changed as student needs change (Meyer et. al., 2024). Simply placing students in advanced courses does not reduce excellence gaps unless students also experience individualized instruction and responsive support. One way to differentiate and ensure the retainment and growth of ELLs in GT programs is to provide monitoring and ongoing formative assessment to evaluate progress and adjust through grouping configurations, in-class supports, or course placements as student needs change.

A limitation of the Meyer et. al. (2024) study related to its findings on flexible ability grouping was the use of their key terms. In some of the literature reviewed, flexible ability grouping was referred to as ability grouping and was equated with "tracking", with some negative connotations in its use of the word. Other researchers mentioned in this study used key terms that equated flexible ability grouping with education strategies such as "differentiation" and "tier" grouping. With conflicting viewpoints on how to group students to reduce excellence gaps, the research team does not clarify how the research can better distinguish between "tracking" and flexible ability groupings.

Conclusion

Several factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs across U.S. elementary schools. A shift in the literature on gifted education in the last 10 years shows that not only are GT offerings a service that all students are entitled to in public education, but that GT programs lack accountability at the federal level (and in numerous states too). Many studies now focus on excellence gaps and how to create more equitable access to GT programs. As shown in several studies (e.g. Carman et. al., 2018; Peters, 2022) successful GT programs eliminated barriers for underrepresented student groups, including ELLs, by using local norms and MDPs for screening and selection. Successful GT programs also implemented asset-based

strategies to build numerous supports for underrepresented students before and during their participation in GT programs.

Chapter Three: Insights, Application, and Future Studies

Pursuing the goals of equity in education includes a discussion of identification gaps between ELLs and non-ELLs in GT education. The last portion of this analysis will summarize how overall trends in public education have contributed to an underrepresentation of ELLs in GT. It will also discuss insights gained from recent studies that aim to eliminate barriers for ELLs. To conclude, this work will propose research-based strategies for application in schools across the U.S. and highlight future areas of study in the field of GT education that provide a path toward equity.

Insights

To ensure access and success for all students in GT programs at the elementary level, including for ELLs, a variety of factors must be examined including the need for more accountability, flexibility, and sustainability in GT programming. Several U.S. states with a rapidly increasing percentage of ELLs in elementary schools have implemented strong rules and regulations regarding funding, policies, identification, and services for educators (Coronado & Lewis, 2017). However, not every state has SEAs or LEAs that regulate GT programs across schools and area districts. Despite having some accountability at the state level, some regions, school districts, and individual schools within their states (e.g. Texas and California) still struggle to meet the target rate of 5-7% of ELLs in GT programs. The continuous lack of accountability at the federal level is one reason that states with local regulations lack funds and resources for professional development, staffing, and screening and preparation tools for students (Meyer et. al., 2024). While funding and accountability may exist for some areas of a state, rural schools in smaller districts encounter more challenges in identifying ELLs as gifted students due to outdated or limited testing methods.

Another reason that states and school districts across the U.S. are not able to meet the target rate for ELLs in GT programs is the screening and referral process whose methods and assessments may exclude underrepresented groups. One common way to identify gifted students at the elementary level is through parent or teacher referral. This method requires advocating for all students to be an equitable practice. Teacher referrals are commonly used to identify gifted students at the elementary level of schooling but not every student is usually considered. Research studies show that having a rubric or similar tool that teachers can use to measure advanced cognitive skills and abilities reduces bias in the referral and assessment process.

Universal screening or consideration of all students for GT programs is a promising practice reviewed in the current literature on gifted education. With no other significant changes in the minimum standards for gifted status, implementing a universal screening program led to a 174% increase in the odds of being identified as gifted among all disadvantaged students, with a 118% increase for Hispanic students, the majority who were ELLs (Card & Giuliano, 2016). In addition to considering all students for GT services, alternative methods for assessing giftedness that are less reliant on standard IQ tests can eliminate barriers to educational opportunities. Another promising educational practice guided by research includes adopting different thresholds for minorities and economically disadvantaged groups due to limited schooling experiences or language abilities (Carman et. al., 2018). Over the past 30 years, states and school districts have introduced new criteria for determining giftedness (e.g., grids using a combination of IQ and achievement). This new criterion has been used to identify more students previously overlooked by more traditional referral or IQ-based GT identification practices. According to De Brey et. al. (2019), although universal consideration for students in GT programs may remove teacher bias from identification practices, diversifying the teacher

workforce can also help provide culturally responsive assessments and learning for underrepresented students in public schools.

The need to increase flexibility and sustainability in GT programming is highlighted in a variety of studies focused on the gifted identification process. To continue offering more flexibility and sustainability in GT education in elementary schools in the U.S., education leaders should recognize the importance of consistent reflection on bias in assessment tools and use intentional preparation and monitoring of underrepresented students once they are selected for advanced programming.

Application

Based on research and trends in student representation, a goal for schools and GT programs nationwide is to help students find success in advanced coursework and to create more opportunities to expand the reach of GT to underrepresented populations. Asset-based instructional practices, including differentiating for various student groups, are important tools that can be used to help all students feel confident and well-equipped in their educational journey. According to Lopez-Kershen (2015), differentiating instruction can create flexibility in student learning for gifted students. Teacher planning should include flexible ability groupings where students learn best and explore content without limitations based on students' language ability. An application of this research is flexible ability grouping. Grouping students based on their cultural, linguistic, and academic skills is a culturally responsive strategy that creates opportunities for a myriad of investigations into one lesson or topic at the same time (Gay, 2018). When group size and structure are carefully planned, flexible groups often lead to improved learning gains (Hunter et. al., 2023). Flexible ability groups are also referred to in the literature as flexible learning groups.

The strategy of grouping students, especially in homogenous, sheltered instruction, is a contended perspective, as shown by research (Hunter et. al., 2023 & Meyer et. al., 2014). Tracking students is generally viewed with negative connotations because it does not allow students to show growth due to low rigor standards or because it locks students into a level of instruction for a significant period without much flexibility for change. Heterogenous grouping such as flexible ability groups differs from tracking because it offers diverse perspectives and new collaborations for ELLs in GT programs (Hunter et. al., 2023). Flexible student groups are most effective for differentiating instruction for ELLs in GT classrooms when the teacher creates groups based on the intersection between student performance data and the actual lesson content (Maheady et al., 2020). In a GT classroom, ELLs grouped heterogeneously may provide a forum for peer interactions, opportunities for positive and corrective feedback, and support of student learning. Heterogenous grouping may also promote racial and cultural integration, while accommodating learning styles that incorporate multicultural education (Friend & Bursuck, 2009).

Another strategy to expand the reach of the GT curriculum to ELLs is a practice known as frontloading. Frontloading is a form of intensive instruction that targets underrepresented students by giving them additional opportunities to learn curriculum and skills that develop the potential of less-privileged students (Peters, 2022). Elementary teachers (and gifted learning specialists) should incorporate frontloading strategies with ELLs in their classrooms to provide frequent exposure to advanced cognitive thinking, content, and assessments. Typically, students who are English learners are not afforded equitable support in the first language, but they are required to demonstrate mastery of content through standardized assessments in English (Cuba, 2020). Frontloading is sometimes referred to in pedagogical literature as previewing new

academic terms. There are many methods where frontloading can be used to enhance the learning of ELLs. Frontloading can take the form of before-reading instructional activities that support comprehension of complex texts and content (Cuba, 2020). Gearing this strategy for potentially gifted learners, frontloading is also providing intensive programming through cohorts. Potentially gifted learners who show promise but have other academic needs (i.e. linguistic ability) are selected for learning cohorts that focus on eliminating academic gaps for underprivileged students.

Future Studies

Future research in GT education for U.S. elementary schools should focus on understanding the variables influencing disproportionality in the identification process for GT services. Three areas of future study in the underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs should be accountability and retention, family engagement and advocacy, and expanding dual immersion GT programs.

Previous research on the underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs has shown a need to do future studies on accountability at the state and local levels and how stricter policies and mandates can positively influence the percentage rates of ELLs in GT programs. Future quantitative studies might focus on examining which U.S. states are meeting the target rate of 5-7% of ELLs in their schools being identified for GT services after implementing stricter policies and mandates locally and regionally.

Family engagement and advocacy are other factors that influence which students are identified for GT services. A future area of study might focus on how community advocacy for

ELLs as gifted learners can influence accountability for school leaders in increasing the participation of underrepresented students in GT programs and influencing (Mikkus et. al., 2020). Parent engagement could also be examined as a factor in the retention and success of ELLS in GT programs in later years, grades 4-5, and even middle school.

Finally, expanding resources and curriculum for GT students can include expanding dual language course offerings to include advanced programs in English and students' home language(s). Some states such as Minnesota have been on the leading edge of expanding their course offerings to include K-12 advanced or accelerated courses for Spanish-speaking ELLs in Spanish and English (NAGC, 2015). Future research could investigate how enrollment in dual language accelerated courses affects the retention and success of ELLs in GT programs.

Conclusion

The underrepresentation of ELLs in GT programs in U.S. elementary schools is a concern because many students are missing out on an academically challenging education. Combatting inequity in gifted education requires mitigating both access gaps and opportunity gaps (Peters et. al., 2021). Research studies have identified factors influencing the disproportionality of ELLs versus non-ELLs in GT education. First, certain referral practices may exclude less-privileged students from the process or be biased towards privileged students. Second, the accountability and funding of schools, districts, and states in public education impact the reach and success of GT programs for underrepresented students. Asset-based strategies and differentiated instruction are tools that educators can use to identify and support ELLs as gifted learners. These strategies involve a shift in understanding and measuring student potential and giftedness that are inclusive of linguistic and cultural differences. A future endeavor in GT education is preparing

multilingual students through rigorous content and academic language teaching in the early years of elementary school to ensure access to and success in gifted education.

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