

# Identifying English Language Learners for Gifted and Talented Programs

*by Sam Savage*

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English Language Learning and Identification Processes While the number and relative proportion of English language learners (ELL) in public school systems is rapidly increasing, ELL students are often overlooked for gifted programs, and for this reason are grossly underrepresented in gifted and talented education programs. Identification practices that were implemented decades ago did not take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of students that are present in schools today. This theoretical article examines current gifted identification practices related to ELL students in public schools nationwide. The authors identify necessary components to this process that are often overlooked for ELL populations. Recommendations for best practice and future research are provided.

The number and relative proportion of ethnic minority and language minority students in the United States is rapidly increasing: In 1979, approximately 1 in 10 children (ages 5-17) spoke a language other than English in the home; by 2003, the proportion had risen to nearly 1 in 5 (9.9 million) children (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Of these 9.9 million, 2.9 million also spoke English with difficulty (5.5% of children aged 5-17). This phenomenal growth is not limited to certain states: Although the western region of the country has seen the most dramatic growth in students who speak languages other than English in the home (29% of children ages 5-17 in 1999), even states in the Midwest, which have the lowest proportion of such students (8% in 1999), have experienced tremendous growth. For example, in Indiana the number of limited-English-proficient students in public schools has risen from 4,822 (0.5%) in 1991-1992 to 31,951 (3.1 %) in 2004-2005.'

Although a large body of research has described the educational needs of special populations of students who are gifted and talented (e.g., students with disabilities, students from poverty, females, Asian/Pacific Islanders, African Americans and Latinos; see, for example, Ford & Grantham, 2003; Plucker, 1996; Reis, 2003; Saccuzzo, Johnson, & Guertin, 1994), only recently has serious attention been drawn to the educational concerns of gifted and talented students whose native language is not English (Bernal, 2002). The underrepresentation of minority students, including English language learners (ELLs), in gifted programs has been acknowledged in the literature for many years (Bernai). Indeed, the Marland Report in 1972 acknowledged that gifted services were not made available to many subpopulations despite the fact that talented students can be found in all cultural groups (Marland).

Frequently, due to the inherent language barriers between ELLs and American schools, ELL students have fewer opportunities compared to their native English-speaking peers to be noticed by teachers for behaviors traditionally characteristic of gifted and talented students (Aguirre, 2003). Inherently, ELL students' giftedness will manifest in ways that are embedded within and that emphasize the students' linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. That is, aptitudes and characteristics of talent potential are culturally defined and embedded (Frasier & Passow, 1998; Montgomery, 2001). Thus, identification procedures should concentrate on a broader conception of giftedness that includes nontraditional approaches that consider the culture (Johnsen, 1999).

Gallagher and Coleman (1994) identified two barriers to authentic assessment procedures in identifying ELL students as gifted and talented. First, poor communication often exists between educators who teach gifted and talented students and teachers of other special populations, such as special education and ELL students-especially in states that are not "English only," where ELL students are embedded in the mainstream classroom with teachers familiar with teaching English as a new language. This lack of communication reduces opportunities to observe and know children, including ELL children, in multiple educational settings. When educators collaborate to bring together information about a child, multiple sources and multiple environmental influences are represented, increasing the opportunity for ELL children to be identified as having exceptional gifts and talents. It is important to mention that there are instances where collaboration occurs and the opportunities for educational and social enrichment are present. Second, the lack of explicit policies regarding proper identification of gifted students from underrepresented groups is another barrier to valid and reliable identification procedures for this population (Gallagher & Coleman). Cited in the literature are additional barriers to effective practices for identifying ELL students as gifted and talented, which include tracking and low teacher expectations of minority students (Hernandez, Sues, & Rochin, 2001), and negative reactions by school personnel toward non- English speaking students (Soto, 1997).

This theoretical article examines current gifted identification practices related to ELL students in public schools nationwide. The authors identify necessary components to this process that are often overlooked for ELL populations. Recommendations for best practice and future research are provided. However, the manner in which these recommendations are used should be based on each individual school, its particular population, and available related resources; therefore, the use of particular assessments is not discussed in this article.

### **The Role of Public Schools in Identifying ELL Children**

When an ELL enters a new community, he or she is not only acculturating to the United States, but also to the culture of his or her neighborhood, school, and classroom. One of the largest and most underacknowledged components of the gifted and talented identification process involves educating parents and guardians about the gifted services available at the school. It is the responsibility of the school to research and learn about the culture from which the child is emigrating. Different cultures stress specific academic and intellectual abilities and talents. Because of this, the ways that ELLs express giftedness and intellect is directly related to their cultural values (Esquivel & Houtz, 1999). Thus, not only do language issues factor into identifying a student, the limited knowledge and awareness of the U.S. educational system also needs to be evaluated. Parents are not aware of the services for gifted children, and yet they are expected to be advocates for their children. In addition, some parents do not speak or read English, thus making it challenging for them to become an active part of their child's education. They may feel intimidated in these situations and may be hesitant to discuss educational issues with the teachers or other school staff (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001).

The benefits of having parents involved in a child's education have been well researched (e.g., Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Finn, 1998). When parents are actively involved in the school culture, schools receive more praise from the community and teacher morale increases (Berger, 2004). In order for parents to be involved, however, they need to feel welcomed and understood in a new and complex educational system (Callahan, 2005). In many cultures, receiving phone calls and notes from the teacher may imply that their child has done something to break a rule (Harris & Plucker, 2006). Therefore, parents may think that when a teacher has not been in contact, the child is acting appropriately and progressing academically. School staff should develop awareness about the relationships that parents have with schools in their country of origin and be careful not to equate these behaviors as disinterest in their child's education. In some cases, parents never attended school and are unfamiliar with the educational system because they were not a part of it (Chrispeels & Rivero).

The school is also responsible for examining other factors that may contribute to inadequate identification procedures and underrepresentation of ELL students in gifted and talented programs. These barriers may include reluctance on the part of gifted program coordinators and district administrators to address this underrepresentation (Bernai, 2002) due to limited financial and physical resources to accommodate additional students in gifted and talented programs (Gallagher & Coleman, 1994). Another contributor to underidentification is fear by parents and school personnel that gifted programs may be compromised if students who do not meet traditional testing requirements are admitted (Bernai). Reluctance and fear contribute to the unwillingness to change the status quo. It has also been reported in the literature that educators often have low expectations of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Frasier & Passow, 1994). Consequently, educators may overlook students who demonstrate culturally relevant gifts and talents that are not recognized or appreciated by the majority culture (Bernai).

### **Use of IQ Tests in Identifying Gifted ELL Students**

A score on a verbal or nonverbal test of intelligence has traditionally been the most common criterion for identification and placement of children in gifted and talented programs. There are many issues to consider when using cognitive ability measures to identify gifted and talented ELL students. Verbal IQ tests require mastery of oral, writing, and/or reading skills in English. Any test that uses writing, reading, and/or oral language skills in English is in part measuring these skills. However, the assessment should accurately measure the intended construct and not additional extraneous factors (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). There are cognitive assessments available in the child's native language; however, to ensure validity, the norms must be appropriate for the individual student based, not only on their country of origin, but also their linguistic history. Furthermore, if the student has not had the same amount of language exposure as the norming group, the results may not be indicative of the student's abilities (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). Thus, the sole reliance on standardized tests, including test of cognitive ability, to identify gifted students is widely considered inappropriate for ethnic and linguistic minorities, and has been cited as the root cause of underrepresentation of such students in gifted programs (Bernai, 2002; Sarouphim, 2002). Although several nonverbal tests of intelligence exist, extensive research on the validity and reliability of their use with ELL populations has not been conducted. Reliance on a single standardized test score such as an IQ score has also been identified as the major cause of demographic homogeneity in gifted and talented programming, and has been considered to be an inappropriate tool for identification of gifted and talented students (Bernai, 2002; Callahan, 2005; Sarouphim, 2002), especially ELL students. Despite the diverse nature of intelligence and giftedness (Rueda, 1997), more than 90% of school districts use test scores, including

IQ scores, in the decision to place students in gifted and talented programs (Ford & Grantham, 2003). If standardized tests in English are used exclusively, in lieu of the more authentic assessment procedures, ELL students are unlikely to be identified as gifted.

Although there are no universally accepted valid and reliable identification procedures for identifying gifted and talented ELL students, best practices in educational and psychological assessment emphasize authentic and dynamic methods and procedures (Castellano, 1998). Authentic assessment, or the collection of data from observing the interaction of students with varied learning opportunities, can provide a better profile for identification (Callahan, 2005; Frasier & Passow, 1994). The use of multiple criteria and nontraditional assessments along with the appropriate use of intelligence tests and measures of achievement is largely advocated for in the identification of giftedness, especially with nonmajority and ELL populations. Authentic and dynamic procedures for identifying gifted and talented ELLs include but are not limited to classroom observations, checklists and rating scales, portfolio evaluations, teacher nominations, problem-solving based assessments, teaching within the testing situation, interviews with parents and communities, self-identification, and alternative testing (Castellano; Johnsen, 1999; Sarouphim, 2002).

One alternative instrument used particularly in the Southwest is the DISCOVER assessment, the development of which was supported by funds from the Javits Gifted and Talented Education Program. DISCOVER was designed to be culturally sensitive to diverse groups, and the instructions are given in the native language of the students assessed. Based on Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences and research that argues that problem-finding should be valued over the solving of already defined problems, DISCOVER measures competence in spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, and personal intelligences-abilities determined by the developers as necessary for school success. The DISCOVER criteria for identification are not as well-defined as those in standardized achievement tests, which according to their critics place an undue emphasis on numerical data, rigid criteria, and students' ranking (Sarouphim, 2002). Using a sample of Native American and Hispanic students, Sarouphim examined the identification rates of traditional, standardized tests compared to an alternative assessment, DISCOVER, and found that the number of gifted, minority students identified was higher with the DISCOVER assessment. While no research using the DISCOVER assessment has focused solely on ELLs, the emphasis on cultural sensitivity, nonverbal components, and alignment with the multiple intelligences theory make it an assessment that may be an effective component of a multifaceted, gifted identification process for ELLs.

### **Recommendations for Identifying Gifted ELL Students**

The rapidly changing demographics of our nation bring attention to the need to analyze and reform our current identification and assessment practices for gifted and talented ELLs. Identification practices that were implemented decades ago did not take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of students in schools today. Below we offer recommendations for school districts invested in operating more inclusively, avoiding assessment bias, and improving their methods of identifying gifted and talented ELLs. Our recommendations for the identification of gifted and talented ELLs borrow from Coleman's (2003) framework, which articulates a three-tiered procedure for identifying gifted and talented students. Although this procedure is empirically and conceptually supported, we need more research to determine if this method works as an overarching approach.

**Tier I:** Conduct a general screening or student search. Implement a schoolwide (or districtwide) screening system that is applied to every student in the general population as well as the ELL population. Districts should use multiple criteria to gain a complete picture of students' talent and potential. All assessments must be administered in the children's native language as well as in English. Policy makers and researchers should test the reliability and validity of translated assessments in an effort to make future gifted screenings and assessments accessible to non-English speakers. Multiple screening procedures should be given (e.g., curriculum-based assessment, identification of learning characteristics, assessment of nonverbal cognitive abilities) from multiple sources (e.g., teachers, parents, peers, grades, self-report) at multiple times throughout the year (Coleman, 2003).

Multifaceted assessment procedures should be implemented so that information is gathered (a) from multiple sources (caregivers/ families, teachers, students, and others with significant knowledge of the students), (b) in different ways (e.g., observations, performances, products, portfolios, interviews), and (c) in different contexts (e.g., inschool and out-of-school settings). Information about the gifted program and identification practices of the district must be provided in the native language to parents, and should include both characteristics to look for in their child that might indicate giftedness, and procedures for notifying the district's gifted coordinator if such traits are observed. The screening process should be dynamic and ongoing throughout the school year so that migrant and immigrant students who matriculate into the school system at different times in the school year have a chance to participate in the assessment and identification process. Finally, a district task force should monitor the referral and identification procedures for accountability.

Tier II: Review students for eligibility. At this stage, ELL students who demonstrated potential based on the screening process are identified and considered in the second tier of the assessment and identification process. Professional development of regular classroom teachers and especially language instruction program teachers (such as ESL teachers) aimed at recognizing talent in ELL students should occur at this time. Data should be reviewed by a team of school personnel that includes gifted and talented and ELL teachers. Parents and general education teachers should be active members of the team. After reviewing the data for each student, a team decision is made to either (a) collect additional data about the student, or (b) immediately place the student in the program for gifted and talented children. Adaptations to the curriculum may be necessary, particularly with regard to the child's native language.

Tier III: Match students to services. ELL students with demonstrated high potential are offered appropriate educational services, which may include an alternate placement (e.g., class for gifted and talented students) or enriched services (e.g., afterschool class). Specific curricular programming should be individualized to the ELL student's unique strengths. Thoughtful and creative planning for ELLs who are gifted and talented often requires very specialized consideration of appropriate services. To increase the representation of ELL students in gifted and talented programs, a certain number of slots may be set aside for ELL students. When possible, districts should supplement state money designated for gifted education with district funds to cover the costs of an expanded identification system, including but not limited to psychologists' time for administering tests, additional bilingual gifted teaching positions, and teacher and school staff trainings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Our review of the literature and best practices highlights several areas for future research. First and foremost, research should address the lack of information on effective practices for identifying ELL gifted students. The traditional reliance on English- only standardized tests clearly discriminates against ELL students, yet surprisingly little information is available on whether using versions of common instruments in languages other than English leads to higher identification rates. Second, future research should examine the role of cultural beliefs about giftedness, intelligence, creativity, and related constructs within the family environments of ELL students. If families believe gifted education to be undesirable for cultural or economic reasons, for example, even the "fairest" possible identification system will not result in increased delivery of services to ELL gifted students. Third, researchers should investigate the efficacy and efficiency of alternative assessments that may help identify ELL gifted students. Many alternative assessments have been proposed, but with few exceptions most of them are supported by only anecdotal data or are far too unwieldy or expensive to be used on a large scale. Due to the research supporting the use of the DISCOVER assessment with minority youth, research focusing on the effectiveness of gifted identification within the ELL population will be especially informative. An analysis of state policies for gifted and talented programs revealed that in addition to a clear commitment at the state level, a successful identification program needs a proactive strategy and strong leadership in order to be implemented (Gallagher & Coleman, 1994). Support to local school districts through additional resources and expertise; flexible guidelines, which allow districts to develop policy application plans; and collaborative networks among higher education, teachers, and leaders outside the field of education all can facilitate policy implementation (Gallagher & Coleman). Additionally, Bernal (2002) contends that no meaningful changes in the identification process will take place in traditional programs unless convincing, reliable data can be used to justify the outcomes of an alternative selection system.

### **Conclusion**

In a review of the literature concerning the identification of culturally diverse gifted and talented students, Plucker (1996) reported that recommendations for identification of gifted and talented students from minority groups ought to (a) use multiple assessment criteria and means of gathering relevant information, (b) emphasize the role of cultural influences on the identification process, and (c) consider carefully the role that language plays during the identification process. Developing appropriate identification procedures is important, but the school administration and their policies must also promote and emphasize these procedures. That is, successful identification of gifted and talented ELL students entails proactive work and visionary leadership. In addition to an emphasis on authentic identification procedures carried out by competent school personnel, best practices in the identification of gifted and talented ELL students are underscored by the proactive and dedicated leadership of school administrators (Gallagher & Coleman, 1994) who are committed to identifying gifted and talented ELL students.

The demographics of the United States are changing dramatically, and more schools across the nation will be enrolling ELLs at increasing rates. All educators need to be ready when these students step foot in the door. School staff should be taught about the cultures of their students. New identification and assessment strategies should be employed by the school district based on the values or particular culture of the child. Future research should aim to define the values of education and giftedness in a child's native culture. Lastly, while improving the identification practices of ELLs for gifted programs is an important component to providing equitable education for all children, it must also be noted that if there are no culturally and linguistically competent programs for gifted students to enter once identified, the process is not complete.