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Georgia Harris

University of Wollongong, gh812@uowmail.edu.au

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Abstract

The 1972 Marland Report stated that gifted education services were often not made available to various sub-populations of students, despite the fact that gifted students are found across all cultural groups. The underrepresentation of these minority students in gifted education programs has been recognised in the literature for several years, however, only recently has serious attention been given to the inclusion of Language Background other than English (LBOTE) and English Language Learners (ELLs) in gifted education programs. This paper will address giftedness in LBOTE student populations through exploring the issues of identification, professional development and nurturing home–school partnerships to support gifted LBOTE children, in the school and home environments.

Keywords

Language Background other than English (LBOTE); gifted education; gifted identification; professional development; home–school relationship



Addressing giftedness in LBOTE student populations: Issues in identification, professional development and home–school partnerships

Georgia Harris

Bachelor of Primary Education (Honours), Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

The 1972 Marland Report stated that gifted education services were often not made available to various sub-populations of students, despite the fact that gifted students are found across all cultural groups. The underrepresentation of these minority students in gifted education programs has been recognised in the literature for several years, however, only recently has serious attention been given to the inclusion of Language Background other than English (LBOTE) and English Language Learners (ELLs) in gifted education programs. This paper will address giftedness in LBOTE student populations through exploring the issues of identification, professional development and nurturing home–school partnerships to support gifted LBOTE children, in the school and home environments.

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Introduction

In Australia, many metropolitan schools enrol large populations of students from a Language Background other than English (LBOTE), including English Language Learners (ELLs). ELL refers to those students who have been born ‘overseas’ and immigrated to Australia. It is often the case that these children do not have the English language as their ‘mother tongue’, nor are they provided with adequate opportunities to practice their English-language learning in the home environment (Vialle & Rogers, 2009). In 2007, LBOTE students accounted for 27.9% of total enrolments in NSW primary schools (Chen & Harris, 2009). By 2009, over 215,000 LBOTE students were enrolled in NSW government schools (NSW DET, 2009) and that figure has continued to rise. One of the concerns within the field of gifted education is how to best identify and serve these culturally diverse students (Pierce et al., 2007).

Identification of the gifted LBOTE child

Identification of the gifted LBOTE child is considered to be one of the most-complex elements in the implementation of a gifted program (Pierce et al., 2007). Traditionally, identification has entailed the testing of ability or achievement (Cross, 2013), with those responsible for student admittance into gifted programs often



relying solely on the provided test score (De Wet & Gubbins, 2011). However, such tests have received criticism for displaying bias against culturally diverse populations (Cross, 2013). As a result, educators must, first, be aware of bias in identification procedures and, second, consider how to adjust identification procedures so as to adequately recognise and serve all students, regardless of their cultural background (Briggs, Reis & Sullivan, 2008).

Briggs, Reis and Sullivan (2008) describe three types of bias that may explain the low number of LBOTE students identified for gifted programs, as a result of relying solely on the testing of ability or achievement: linguistic, communication and cognitive. Linguistic bias can occur when test errors made by LBOTE students (due to limited proficiency in English) mask students' true knowledge of a topic. Communication bias can occur when a student has to respond to test items in a manner that is culturally different from their familiar way of communicating. Cognitive bias can occur when gifted students are only identified using standardised tests, as pupils from a specific cultural group may display their cognitive abilities in ways that are not measured by such an assessment. It is also important for educators to note that the test performance of a high-ability LBOTE student may not be truly representative of that student's giftedness if the student is aware that he/she may be the lone member of their cultural group identified for a gifted program (Cross, 2013).

In order to overcome bias, a school's identification procedures should concentrate on a broader conception of giftedness, with the inclusion of non-traditional approaches that take into account a student's cultural background (Harris et al., 2009). Procedures may include the use of non-verbal testing as part of the comprehensive identification process, in addition to teacher referrals. Non-verbal testing has become increasingly popular in gifted identification, as it is thought to level the playing field for bilingual and minority students (Lohman & Gambrell, 2012; Lohman, Korb & Lakin, 2008). Identification procedures should emphasise collaboration amongst all school personnel, both teaching and non-teaching, as the opportunity to identify gifted LBOTE students is increased when educators collaborate, bringing together information regarding a student from multiple sources (Harris et al., 2009).

Professional development

The successful construction of a school's gifted identification practice also calls for a focus on specialised staff professional development (Esquierdo & Arreguin-Anderson, 2012). Both regions and schools have the responsibility to provide staff development opportunities in the area of gifted and talented education for principals, teachers and other school personnel (NSW DET, 2004). Whilst the United States has increasingly recognised the benefits of such training, unfortunately, there has not been a concomitant recognition in Australia (Rowley, 2012). Despite this, evidence from a number of international studies has shown that additional pre-service, in-service and postgraduate gifted education training results in a greater understanding of giftedness (Lassig, 2009; Thomson, 2006). As gifted populations can be found across all cultural groups (Baldwin, 2005; Harris et al., 2007; Sarouphim & Maker, 2010), it is imperative that professional development focuses on the identification and servicing of culturally diverse gifted populations.



The attitude of educators toward gifted students is a significant consideration in the development of a gifted education program (Lassig, 2009). Teacher nominations are often the first step in gifted identification and subsequent inclusion in a specific program (Esquierdo & Arreguin-Anderson, 2012; Miller, 2009), where ignorance of the existence of gifted students who do not fit stereotypical notions of giftedness can occur (Elhoweris, 2008; Miller, 2009). Teachers can hold very traditional beliefs surrounding gifted education, and inclusion in such programs, and often do not include “diverse and inclusive characteristics of giftedness” (Miller, 2009, p. 66) when stating their beliefs. As such, teaching staff may have low expectations toward minority groupings, particularly LBOTE children (Miller, 2009). It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that a teacher’s beliefs in relation to giftedness can influence the identification of gifted LBOTE students, and their subsequent underrepresentation in gifted programs (Ford, 2013; Miller, 2009).

These beliefs will often not be changed unless they are acknowledged as unsatisfactory by the individual themselves (Miller, 2009). As a result, professional development programs targeting gifted education should explicitly explore teachers’ beliefs surrounding giftedness and LBOTE student populations (King, Kozleski & Landsdowne, 2009; Miller, 2009). Teacher training should also entail staff becoming aware of the relationships that parents of their students developed with schools in their country of origin. Such knowledge can contribute to ensuring that educators do not interpret specific behaviours of parents as disinterest in their child’s education (Harris et al., 2007). It is important that the school counsellor is present at all professional development opportunities, as the student population that counsellors are required to work with is diverse and, as such, they have a substantial need to develop their knowledge, skills and awareness of best practice with ethnic minority students (Burnham, Mantero & Hooper, 2009). Throughout their professional careers, all teaching staff will encounter, and need to be prepared to both identify and serve, gifted students, including LBOTE students, and need to undertake specialised training to be able to successfully do so (Rowley, 2012).

Nurturing home–school partnerships to support gifted LBOTE students

In addition to the provision of staff development opportunities, it is the responsibility of school communities to nurture home–school partnerships to support their gifted students (NSW DET, 2004). The education of parents and guardians about the gifted services available at a school is often one of the largest and most under-acknowledged components of a successful gifted education program (Harris et al., 2007). Whilst the school is responsible for communicating with parents and guardians about what plans are in place for the development of gifted LBOTE learners (Vialle & Rogers, 2009), the parents of such children often face several challenges in the communication process.

The relationship between the school community and parents of LBOTE children may be problematic (Vialle & Rogers, 2009). Such a counter-productive relationship can be attributed to the schooling experiences of the parent, which may have resulted in a high level of distrust and divergent perspectives about the school’s motives (Cobb, 2012; Vialle & Rogers, 2009). In addition, some parents may have never attended school themselves and, thus, may not be familiar with the education



system (Harris et al., 2007). Often, parents of LBOTE students are not able to speak or read English, posing a linguistic barrier (Cobb, 2012; Harris et al., 2007). As a result, they may be hesitant to discuss educational issues with school staff, limiting the parents' capacity to become an active participant in their child's education (Harris et al., 2007).

Whilst such challenges do exist, it is important that these barriers are overcome, as the benefits of consulting with parents are plentiful. Parents and caregivers are able to provide "useful and reliable information about the abilities and characteristics of their children" (NSW DET, 2004, p. 9). In addition, when parents are actively involved in their child's education, schools receive praise from the local community, with consequent increase in teacher morale (Harris et al., 2007). Gifted children also reap the benefits when their parents have an understanding of giftedness and are actively involved in school life (Weber & Stanley, 2012). Without the involvement of parents in education programs, there may be a lack of accurate information for parents to access when it comes to best serving their gifted child's needs at home (Weber & Stanley, 2012).

Programs provided to parents should deliver research-based information on the characteristics and identification of gifted students, as well as the appropriate education and parenting practices of such children, so as to increase awareness of the intellectual, social and psychological needs of gifted pupils (Weber & Stanley, 2012). In order to increase participation of LBOTE parents in their child's schooling, a program should educate parents on the school's intentions with regard to its gifted program (Vialle & Rogers, 2009). A parental education program should also provide parents with advice on helping their child to understand their cultural heritage and how this history can be integrated with the dominant culture's values and beliefs (as giftedness may be viewed as aligning with a 'dominant culture's values'), while still maintaining cultural understanding and respect (Vialle & Rogers, 2009). Programs should be presented not only by teaching staff, but also by professionals in guidance and counselling for gifted children, as they are often the most appropriately qualified to design and present such programs (Weber & Stanley, 2012). In order to combat language barriers and promote involvement by minority parents, bilingual personnel should be present in arranged meetings to assist with communication (Cassity & Harris, 2000). Members from the culture who do not have students enrolled at the school should also be encouraged to attend these programs (Vialle & Rogers, 2009), so as to increase understanding, and ultimately identification, of giftedness in LBOTE student populations. Throughout parent education seminars, it is crucial that the value of gifted education is emphasised to families of diverse cultures. If families perceive gifted education to be undesirable for cultural reasons, even the 'fairest' identification system will not result in an increase of LBOTE students being identified for gifted programs (Harris et al., 2007).

Conclusion

It is essential that the school community views giftedness through multiple lenses, as opposed to the traditional one-size-fits-all approach, in order to achieve successful execution of a gifted program (Esquierdo & Arreguin-Anderson, 2012). A successful model should address the underrepresentation of LBOTE children in gifted programs



through developing culturally appropriate identification procedures. These procedures would include acknowledgement of a broad notion of giftedness and explicit staff and parent professional development programs. The number and proportion of LBOTE students in NSW primary schools is expected to continue to rise and, as such, future research should examine the role of cultural beliefs surrounding giftedness amongst LBOTE students and their families (Harris et al., 2007), so as to further improve the representation of LBOTE students in gifted programs.

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