

Identifying and Nurturing the Gifted Poor

Often overlooked by traditional selection processes, gifted students from poverty backgrounds need to be recognized and celebrated.

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by Paul D. Slocumb and Ruby K. Payne

Schools often claim that their gifted students represent all segments of the student population. But research provides a very different picture. Inequities between those identified as gifted and non-gifted become quite evident, with disproportionate numbers from one segment of the population identified as gifted to the near-exclusion of others.

For example, in one typical urban school district, only 8 percent of students identified as gifted come from those classified as economically disadvantaged-mostly black and Hispanic-who make up 58 percent of the school population, compared to 81 percent of white students, who constitute little more than a third of the school population.

Equal Treatment of Unequals

Such inequities exist because most school districts identify gifted students by using standardized test scores, teacher recommendations, and student grades to establish cutoff scores. This process often screens out underachieving, learning-disabled, culturally different, and-most consistently-students from poverty backgrounds.

This usually occurs because students who come from poverty backgrounds have not had the same opportunities as middle-class students, and the identification processes do not factor in environmental differences. Theoretically, all students are treated equally in meeting established qualifications for giftedness. But, as U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter once said, "There's nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals."

Most schools are middle-class systems that operate from middle-class values. By treating all students in these schools equally, equity actually is compromised. For when traditional methods are used to identify gifted students, such as standardized instruments and performance samples, the outcome is predictable: a large majority of gifted students will come from the middle class. But because environmental impact is not considered, what is really identified is opportunity, not giftedness.

Factoring in the Home Environment

An identification process that takes home environment factors into account is essential if the process is to address the equity issue. Because students from enriched backgrounds typically perform better in school than those from poverty, schools need to offset this disparity by doing two things:

1. They must develop an identification process for the gifted and talented that takes into account the inequality that exists between students from poverty and those from the middle class.

2. They must redesign the way in which services to gifted students are delivered, so that they acknowledge the differences between middle-class students and students from poverty.

Poverty is not just about money, but the "extent to which an individual does without resources" (Payne 1998). The more opportunities and resources that are available to students, the higher their academic performance levels. In poor, uneducated households, students do not have access to the kind of opportunities that can have a positive impact on their skill and production levels, and resources are frequently lacking in both quantity and quality. Students from poverty may have great potential, but they are unable to compete against those who come from highly enriched backgrounds that boast plentiful resources.

To provide equity, schools must replace traditional cutoff scores that reward students from educated, enriched households with a process that examines school performance in the context of the opportunities-or lack thereof-that students have in their home environment. Such a process considers not only the environment, but performance patterns over time. An interviewing instrument, such as the Environmental Opportunities Profile (Slocumb and Payne 2000), allows school personnel to factor in environmental conditions that impact, negatively or positively, student performance in school.

Non-traditional Intelligence

Students from poverty have many gifts and talents that rarely manifest themselves in recognizable and traditionally valued behaviors. For example, they may be very expressive and creative with language, but because they use short phrases, poor syntax, and limited vocabulary, their expressions are usually not acknowledged as indicators of potential talent. Also, though the student from poverty may know a great deal about such things as sports, entertainers, and gangs, this information is not considered to be valuable knowledge.

Conversely, middle-class students who know the names of all the space shuttles and every dinosaur, and can effectively articulate their ideas, are generally viewed as being very bright-and gifted.

Often, poverty and an unstable home environment are closely associated with problem-solving skills. The student who knows how to manipulate family members to avoid triggering anger and physical violence certainly exhibits such skills. So does the student who can spontaneously make up a creative story to avoid being punished. But because situations like these are associated with negative behavior, most teachers would not recognize them as examples of problem-solving skills.

Serving the Gifted from Poverty

A process that identifies gifted students from poverty backgrounds is but a partial solution to the issue of equity. Once these students are identified as gifted, changes within traditional gifted and talented programs are needed to make sure they remain in and benefit from the program (Slocumb and Payne 2000). Placing gifted students from poverty backgrounds in programs that treat them as if they were middle-class students with adequate resources and support systems outside school is a sure indicator of failure. For what these gifted students bring to the learning

environment is rooted in their distinctive home environment and culture, and these factors cannot be ignored.

Traditional gifted programs can place students from poverty backgrounds at risk in several ways:

- Because gifted students from poverty recognize that their backgrounds are not equivalent to those of more affluent gifted students, feelings of inadequacy and a lowering of an already low self-image can occur.
- Students from poverty may lack many of the resources necessary to meet the academic requirements of traditional gifted programs.
- Relationships are a significant factor in the lives of students from poverty, and the gifted find that most of their friends are not in the program. Relinquishing friends for academics can be a huge dilemma and a painful sacrifice.
- Teachers who don't understand the hidden rules of poverty all too often spend more time trying to remove a student from the gifted program than making the kind of adjustments and efforts needed to keep the student in the program.
- Because of the lack of opportunities within the home environment, gifted students from poverty backgrounds often lack many of the basic academic skills expected of gifted students.

Designing an Appropriate Program

The design of a school's gifted program often depends on the number of gifted students and the school's resources. Some districts have schools with sufficient numbers of students to offer special classes. Others have only a few students identified as gifted, and they are usually clustered with non-gifted students. Still others prefer to serve small numbers of gifted students through pullout programs. Of all the program designs, this one is the least defensible for gifted students. Like any special population, they have full-time needs that must be addressed on a full-time basis. Pullout programs that serve these students anywhere from one hour to one day per week are insufficient.

The design of a program that appropriately serves gifted students from poverty backgrounds must allow the teacher flexibility to meet these students' unique needs. The following program design options should be considered:

Looping. In an ideal setting, the teacher would work with gifted students over a period of two or three years. Some elementary schools have addressed this issue through "looping"-- allowing the teacher to move from one grade level to the next with the students. This helps build a strong relationship between the teacher, the students, and their families.

Multiage Classrooms. Schools that provide multiage instruction can frequently accommodate children and their siblings in the same classroom. In poverty, it is not unusual for older siblings to take care of their younger brothers and sisters. The multiage option allows gifted students from poverty backgrounds, accustomed to being with older and younger brothers and sisters, to feel more secure and enables them to help one another with school-related work.

Self-Contained Classrooms. A self-contained elementary classroom with one teacher sets the stage for meaningful relationships to develop between teacher and students. Unfortunately, many elementary schools are gradually moving toward departmental structures that are not conducive to a child-centered curriculum and instructional program. For gifted students from poverty backgrounds, a self-contained classroom with a number of other gifted students sets the stage for meaningful relationships between teacher and students, as well as between students. It also affords the teacher the autonomy necessary to structure the curriculum according to the needs of the learners.

Low Teacher-Student Ratio. Because relationships are important to students from poverty backgrounds, they tend to build close ties to their teacher and may have difficulty "sharing" the teacher with other students in a large class.

Early Intervention. The sooner a school can provide intervention services for students from poverty backgrounds, the better. Prekindergarten programs minimize their disadvantages when they start kindergarten. Because half-day and non-mandatory kindergarten programs are inadequate, full-day kindergarten programs are essential.

Special programs are needed to meet the special needs of gifted children from poverty backgrounds. The challenge for schools is to help these children survive in a middle-class world. The cycle of poverty can be broken through education and meaningful relationships. But continuing to ignore the differences between students from poverty and middle-class backgrounds, while recognizing only the talents and abilities of the latter, can only help to perpetuate a society separated into the haves and have-nots.

Improving Gifted Programs

In order to increase the probability of success for gifted students from poverty backgrounds, programs for the gifted must:

- Have meaningful activities;
- Be full-time programs;
- Assign fewer projects requiring time and resources outside of school;
- Move from rewarding to developing gifts and talents;
- Include in the teaching of academic subjects the values of those subjects;
- Acknowledge the values and hidden rules of diversity; and
- Move from polishing existing skills to helping develop new skills.

Identifying the Gifted Poor

To bring equity to the process for identifying gifted students, schools need to:

- Move from relying on cutoff scores to looking at a preponderance of evidence;
- Move from asking teachers for recommendations to asking for their perceptions;
- Move from nominating selected students to whole-class screening; and
- Move from identifying gifted students only on the basis of schoolwork to factoring in environmental factors that affect school performance.

References

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Slocumb, P. D.; and Payne, R. K. *Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty*. Highlands, TX: RFT Publishing Co., 2000.