Effect of Children’s Ethnicity on Teachers’ Referral and Recommendation Decisions in Gifted and Talented Programs

HALA ELHOWERIS, KAGENDO MUTUA, NEMELODIN ALSHEIKH, AND PAULINE HOLLOWAY

Abstract
This study examines the effect of students’ ethnicity on teachers’ educational decision making. A total of 207 elementary school teachers from a large midwestern city participated in this study. All participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions. Each group was provided with a short case vignette describing a gifted child. One third of the teachers read a vignette describing a European American student, one third read a vignette describing an African American student, and one third served as a control group and received no information about the student’s ethnicity. After reading the vignette, all participants were asked to respond to two questions. The results of this study indicated that the student’s ethnicity did make a difference in the teachers’ referral decisions.

Despite advancement in education reform efforts, to this day African American students continue to experience inequities within the educational system. Recently, a number of scholars have examined the issue of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs (see, e.g., Salend, Garrick Duhancy, & Montgomery, 2002; Townsend, 2002). Moreover, the inherent inequities in the educational system have been discussed in different court cases throughout the years, including Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education (1954) and Larry P. v. Riles (1972, 1979). These inequities in the educational experiences of African American students attending many U.S. public schools have resulted in overrepresentation in particular special education programs, such as those for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, and mental retardation (Harry, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Paton, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002); underrepresentation in programs for gifted and talented students (Ford & Webb, 1994; Maker, 1996); high dropout rates (Grossman, 1995); and low academic achievement (Grossman, 1995).

Most educators agree that gifted and talented children can be found in all socioeconomic strata and in all racial and ethnic groups (Clark, 1983; Kitano & Kirby, 1986). However, in terms of actual practice, a very low percentage of children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are found in gifted and talented programs. For instance, researchers (e.g., Ford, 1993; Ford & Harris, 1991) have pointed out that less than 2% of more than 4,000 articles written about gifted and talented students since 1924 were about students from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Consequently, in recent years, increased attention and efforts have been devoted to the identification practices in gifted and talented programs.

Many studies have criticized current identification practices, noting limitations such as the inappropriate and biased use of assessment procedures (see, e.g., McKenzie, 1986). The question whether teachers are qualified to identify gifted
and talented students has been the topic of much debate throughout the years (Gagné, 1994; Hoge & Cudmore, 1986; Pegnato & Birch, 1959). With culturally and linguistically diverse students, teacher nomination becomes of prime concern for many researchers. For instance, High and Udall (1983) indicated that with culturally and linguistically diverse students, teacher nomination may not accurately reflect potentially gifted and talented students. Kitano and Kirby (1986) also indicated that the low referral rates for gifted and talented assessment from teachers hinder the identification of African American students for gifted and talented programs. Woods and Achey (1990) believed that teachers sometimes have negative attitudes or expectations of children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and, therefore, often overlook these children for the gifted and talented programs. Moreover, Hadaway and Marek-Schroer (1992) stated that “teachers may assume a student is not gifted based on a child’s language proficiency in their first and second language, their use of ‘nonstandard’ English, accent, differing values, aspirations, and levels of motivation” (p. 74). In a more recent study, Powell and Siegle (2000) reported that when teachers were asked to nominate students for gifted and talented programs based on hypothetical student profiles, teachers were found to select more likely profiles when the students’ behavior did not match expected gender stereotypes. Although the literature has paid substantial attention to the role of the teacher in the identification of gifted and talented children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, to date no empirical study has investigated the effect of the child’s cultural background or ethnicity on teachers’ referral and placement decisions in gifted and talented programs.

Previous studies have shown that teachers and the general public have negative stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions of the abilities of children from different cultural backgrounds (Delpit, 1995; Grossman, 1995; Jensen & Rosengeld, 1974; Ogbo, 1992). Various studies have attempted to explain factors associated with teachers’ negative attitudes toward children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They demonstrated that educators hold different attitudes toward children as a function of their ethnicity (Ford & Webb, 1994; Prieto & Zucker, 1981; Zucker & Prieto, 1977), gender (Gagné, 1993), and socioeconomic status (Frey, 2002; Guskin, Peng, & Simon, 1992; Mutua, 2001). Furthermore, a number of researchers have investigated the role of teachers in the referral process in an attempt to explain the effect of children’s characteristics on teachers’ educational decision making in special education programs. The results of these studies have indicated that teachers tend to evaluate African American, Hispanic American, and poor students’ academic performance and behavior in a biased manner (Frey, 2002; Haller & Davis, 1980; Prieto & Zucker, 1981; Zucker & Prieto, 1977). For instance, in studies where teachers were given the same information about students except for their ethnic backgrounds, teachers were found to view programs serving students with mental retardation as a more appropriate placement option for Mexican American children than for European American children (Zucker & Prieto, 1977). Likewise, teachers viewed the placement of Mexican American children into programs serving students with emotional disturbance as more appropriate than for European American children (Prieto & Zucker, 1981). In a study where educators were watching, hearing, or watching and hearing video tapes of middle- and lower-class European American, African American, and Hispanic American students, teachers rated middle-class European American students more favorably than lower-class European American children or than African American children regardless of social class (Jensen & Rosenfeld, 1974). Frey (2002) also found that socioeconomic status was one of the significant predictors of special education teachers’ placement recommendations. Children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds were more likely to be referred for restrictive placements.

Today, there exists a considerable discrepancy between the makeup of the student population and that of the teaching force. The majority of U.S. teachers are European Americans. Indeed, 80% to 90% of the teachers are European American and middle class. However, the student populations is very diverse, and by the year 2040, children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are expected to be the majority in classrooms (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003).

Despite the apparent biases based on child characteristics that the literature portrays (Frey, 2002; Haller & Davis, 1980; Prieto & Zucker, 1981; Zucker & Prieto, 1977) and the significant ethnic discrepancy between the student population and the teaching force, no empirical studies have examined whether this phenomenon still operates in deciding the placement of children in gifted and talented programs. Moreover, although attention has focused on teachers’ identification practices with culturally diverse youth in gifted and talented programs, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the effect of children’s ethnicity on teachers’ eligibility decisions in gifted and talented programs. Therefore, the particular focus of this study was to examine the effect of children’s ethnicity on teachers’ referral and placement decisions in gifted and talented programs.

**Method**

**Participants**

Stratified cluster sampling (Gay & Airasian, 2000) was used to select a sample for this study. The sample was drawn from 16 elementary schools from three geographical quadrants of a large midwestern city school district (Northeast, Northwest, and Southwest). Participants were 207 elementary school teachers. As is typical of national trends in the gender representation of teachers, the majority of the participants were women (92%). The racial composition was also representa-
tive, with 83% of the participants being European American. See Table 1 for more information about the participants.

**Instrument**

The instrument was a short descriptive vignette about a student who possessed the research-based characteristics of an individual who could be classified as gifted and talented and, therefore, would qualify for placement in a gifted and talented program. To ensure content validity, all the student traits in the vignette were derived from descriptions of gifted children in special education introductory textbooks by Hallahan and Kauffman (2000); Kirk, Gallagher, and Anastasiow (2000); and Piirto (1999) and from a professional journal article by Minner, Prater, Bloodworth, and Walker (1987). The test–retest reliability for the two questionnaire items was adequate for the purpose of this study ($r = .75, p < .05$; $r = .76, p < .05$, respectively).

Approximately one third of the participants were provided with information that the student was European American and one third that the student was African American; one third, serving as a control group, received no information about the student’s ethnicity. All social and behavioral traits of the child described in the vignette were held constant except for ethnicity. Immediately after reading the brief vignette, participants responded to two questions. Each question was rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The two questions participants responded to were:

A. This student should be referred for a comprehensive evaluation for possible placement in a gifted and talented student program.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Slightly disagree
4. Slightly agree
5. Agree
6. Strongly agree

B. I feel this student should be placed in a gifted and talented student program.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Slightly disagree
4. Slightly agree
5. Agree
6. Strongly agree

Reading the vignette and responding to the two questions took approximately 15 minutes. In addition to the information that was gathered from the two questions, other information on teacher characteristics (see Table 1) was collected, including teachers’ race, gender, age, educational level, and teaching experience.

<table>
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<td>25 or less</td>
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<td><strong>Teaching experience (years)</strong></td>
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<td>7 or more</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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*Note. SES = socioeconomic status.*

**Procedure**

The researcher was introduced to all the faculty in each participating school during a faculty meeting. The researcher gave a brief overview of the study and handed out packets of the study to the faculty who expressed a willingness to participate. Each packet handed out contained a consent form, instruction sheet, demographic information sheet, and study vignette and questionnaire. The participants were asked to read the vignette of the child and to answer the two questions. The teachers at each school were seated in groups of four to eight, with those remaining forming an additional group. Participants were randomly assigned to three treatment conditions, with each teacher having an equal chance of receiving any one of the three versions of the instrument. Participants were told in the instruction sheet that the researcher was interested in how teachers perceived gifted youngsters and in identifying factors that could be related to the referral and
placement decisions in gifted and talented programs. Each group was presented with a short vignette describing a gifted and talented student. For Group 1, the student was identified as European American; for Group 2, the student was identified as African American; and for Group 3, no information about the child’s ethnicity was given. Each participant took about 15 minutes to read the vignette and enter his or her judgments about it on a rating sheet, then passed it back to the researcher along with a signed consent form.

Data Analysis

The effect of students’ ethnicity was explored for the two dependent variables (teachers’ referral and placement decisions), using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA).

Results

All analyses were performed using SPSS MANOVA. The results of evaluation of assumptions of independence, normality, and homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices (boxes $M = 21.594; p > .05$) were satisfactory. MANOVA indicated a significant effect for ethnicity, $A = .954, F(4, 400) = 2.406, p \leq .05$. Results from the MANOVA between-subjects tests are reported for each dependent variable.

Referral Decision

The between-subjects MANOVA results showed a significant effect for the student’s ethnicity, $F = 4.807, p \leq .05$. That is, the child’s ethnicity did make a difference for the teachers’ referral decision. Table 2 shows means and standard deviations for the teachers’ referral decisions based on the child’s ethnicity.

Placement Decision

The between-subjects MANOVA results showed no significant main effect for the student’s ethnicity, $F = 2.135, p \geq .05$. That is, the placement recommendations for the gifted and talented programs were not a function of the student’s ethnicity. Table 2 shows means and standard deviations for the teachers’ placement decisions based on the child’s ethnicity.

In summary, the results of the between-subjects MANOVA tests indicated that referral decision was the dependent variable that contributed to the overall multivariate significance. Using Scheffé’s post hoc test, statistically significant differences were found between the mean scores of the group that received the African American vignette and the control group—that is, the group that received no information about the student’s ethnicity (see Table 3). These post hoc results suggest that teachers who read a vignette describing an African American child were statistically different from those teachers who read a vignette describing a child of unspecified ethnicity. Teachers were found to be more likely to refer the nonlabeled student to a gifted and talented program than the African American student.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of students’ ethnicity on teachers’ referral and recommendation for placement in a gifted and talented program through the use of
vignettes. Specifically, the research question was, Does the student’s ethnicity have an effect on the teachers’ referral and recommendation for placement in the gifted and talented program? MANOVA indicated a significant main effect for ethnicity. The univariate analysis indicated that referral was the dependent variable that contributed to the overall multivariate significance. Based on the Scheffé analysis, teachers were found to refer students of unspecified ethnicity at a slightly higher rate than African American students.

The results of this study indicated that the student’s ethnicity does make a difference in the teachers’ referral decisions. Elementary school teachers treated identical information contained in the vignettes differently and made different recommendations despite the fact that the basic student information was identical in all ways except for ethnicity.

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Prieto and Zucker (1981) and Zucker and Prieto (1977), who found that when educators were given the exact same information about students except for their ethnic backgrounds, educators felt that special class placement was more appropriate for Mexican American students than for European American students.

The results of this study suggest that teachers were relying on informal information (i.e., the child’s ethnicity) when making referral decisions for gifted and talented programs. This finding is also consistent with the work of Powell and Siegle (2000), who reported that when teachers were asked to nominate students for gifted and talented programs based on hypothetical student profiles, they were more likely to select profiles in which the students’ behavior did not match expected gender stereotypes.

In addition to the results of this study, the results of several empirical studies have established that factors affecting teacher expectancy and behavior include ethnic background (Ford & Webb, 1994; Prieto & Zucker, 1981), child’s race (Prieto & Zucker, 1981), and child’s socioeconomic status (Frey, 2002; Guskin et al., 1992; Mutua, 2001).

In this study, it appears that teachers perceived nonlabeled and European American students as essentially the same in contrast to African American students. This is particularly disturbing because African American students make up approximately 17% of all school-age children. Stereotypical notions on the part of teachers about what an African American student is likely to be capable of may be effectively barring some African American gifted youngsters from participating in gifted and talented programs.

Beady and Hamsell (1981) examined whether the race of teachers in African American elementary schools was associated with teachers’ expectations of student achievement, and they reported that African American teachers had significantly higher expectations that their students would enter and complete college than European American teachers. Consistent with national trends, in the present study, 82% of the participating teachers were European American. This can offer an explanation of why elementary school teachers in this study tended to expect less of African American students. Furthermore, the majority of the participants in this study reported that they were working at a school serving poor students. It is not uncommon for teachers to expect less from poor children, as studies have shown in the past (see, e.g., Mutua, 2001).

Although placement decision was not statistically significant in this study, there are some factors that should be considered. The majority of the participating teachers had more than 7 years of teaching experience. Experienced teachers may feel that students should not be recommended for placement in gifted and talented programs based on the limited information contained in the vignette. Referral is an initial phase in the gifted and talented programs, unlike placement, for which teachers need to have more information to make a decision. Thus, perhaps the participants in this study were not comfortable with the limited information in the vignette for making placement decisions, and, therefore, they focused on the data rather than on the student’s characteristics. Future researchers may need to develop more comprehensive vignettes of various youngsters to determine if additional descriptive information about the students influences teachers’ placement decisions.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations in this study, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the population used for the study was limited to elementary school teachers, which affects generalization to other teachers. However, the majority of students’ referrals happen during their elementary school years. Second, the study is geographically limited to people living in the midwestern United States, where the number of African Americans is relatively small compared to other areas of the United States. Teachers in other parts of the country may respond differently from those who live in the Midwest. The sample was largely composed of European Americans and, therefore, did not allow for the variability that ethnicity might introduce. For instance, ethnic differences of teachers have been found to affect teachers’ decisions in the referral process (Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, & Bodlakova, 1982). Therefore, the use of a more heterogeneous sample of participants would likely have different results. Future researchers may also need to examine other ethnicities, including Native American, Hispanic American, or Asian American, and their impact on teachers’ eligibility decisions for gifted and talented programs.

Implications for Practice

The results of this investigation—that some students are referred to a gifted and talented program whereas others are not—may add to the reasons why children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are enrolled in gifted and talented programs in disproportionately low numbers. The
results of this study suggest a potential link between teachers' bias against African American children and their underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs. To reduce the inappropriate and biased referrals to programs for students with disabilities and to increase the number of appropriate referrals to programs for gifted and talented students, it has been recommended that general educators' knowledge of cultural factors be increased (Grossman, 1995). First, based on the well-known expectancy theory (Merton, 1948), one can argue that what teachers expect of students influences what students come to expect of themselves. To address this, teacher education programs may need to focus on changing teachers' attitudes toward children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds through continual meaningful exposure to and experience with such children. Second, multicultural education (Banks, 1999) as a comprehensive approach can be emphasized in teacher education programs to empower teachers in schools. Teacher education programs should focus on preparing teachers multicultural by confronting their prejudices and biases, broadening their perspectives of personal values, increasing their knowledge of other cultures (Kea & Utley, 1998), and helping them to become aware of how their own personal values can affect their evaluation of a child coming from a linguistic and cultural background other than their own. Finally, in addition to the modification of teacher education programs, the referral process to gifted and talented programs must be monitored for any evidence of potential bias.

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REFERENCES


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- The student’s doctoral committee must have approved the dissertation proposal.
- The student should have plans to complete the study during the 2005–2006 academic year.
- The amount requested cannot exceed $5,000.

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