English Language Learner Students and Gifted Identification

Among all the subgroups of students whose performance in school is commonly studied, English language learners (ELLs) are the least represented in gifted education programs. A variety of related reasons may account for this state of affairs, but the nature of gifted identification procedures is probably one of the more important causes. Awareness of this issue can help point us in the right direction to make progress in identifying children who would benefit from receiving appropriate gifted education services while they are learning English. Appropriate identification and inclusion benefit not only ELL students, but also help prepare non-ELL gifted learners to thrive in our increasingly diverse society.

Who are English language learners? Although students learning English are often stereotyped, there is a tremendous degree of diversity that often goes unrecognized within the ELL population. Much of this diversity, as well as the explanation for the need these students have for English instruction, can be traced to their status as recent immigrants to the United States. Among a group of over 400 gifted ELL students I studied recently, there were more than 40 languages and countries of origin represented, and this was within a single large school district. In other settings, however, such as the elementary school where I conducted my dissertation research in 2001, more than 90 percent of the large ELL population shared a single country of origin and many were even from the same state within that country. This tremendous variety in ELL students means that it is important for parents to develop a nuanced understanding of the school environment that their children attend, because effective services may look quite different in one setting than they do in another.

Gifted identification practices vary widely from one location to the next because policies and procedures are developed at the state and local levels, but some form of standardized testing is almost always used. Because tests are almost always in English, they may inadvertently be measuring English language ability rather than academic or intellectual ability. Although some test-makers claim that using their nonverbal tests may reduce or even eliminate such biases, researchers have found that these claims do not always hold up. Although portfolios of student work require more time to evaluate, they offer one promising alternative to standardized testing for identifying high ability among children who are learning English. As a parent, it is a good idea to familiarize yourself with the gifted identification criteria that apply in your children’s setting so that you can pursue the portfolio option, if available, when appropriate. Many states, districts, and gifted education advocacy organizations now provide identification criteria and related information online.

A gifted education program is strongest and its students are most successful when identification procedures and program content are closely aligned. For students learning English, this suggests that gifted programming emphasizing language skills would be appropriate if students are identified based on their rapid acquisition of English; conversely, students identified using measures that emphasize spatial or mathematical abilities may be better served by gifted programming that emphasizes the development of those abilities. Students learning English may require some additional scaffolding, but all gifted learners benefit from understanding the structure, functions, and characteristics of English as
well as those of other languages. Instructional content also should be relevant to student interests, and these interests will vary with the setting and student population; such relevance helps maximize the likelihood that successful students in the gifted program reflect the diversity of their community. Gifted ELL students bring to the classroom a valuable perspective that can educate other learners around them, particularly those who may not know more than one language themselves.

Finally, a school's underlying philosophy on gifted education may be just as important as the specific definitions or procedures it follows. Does your child's school focus on the strengths each child brings to the classroom and emphasize addressing students' individual learning needs? Or is the emphasis placed on perceived deficits and blind adherence to rules? Multilingualism should be viewed as a source of strength, regardless of where it is found. As an engaged and informed parent, whether of an ELL child or not, I encourage you to look around your child's school, and work for appropriate gifted education services for all gifted students.

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