INCREASING NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN INVOLVEMENT IN GIFTED PROGRAMS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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Native American Indian students are not identified or served at the same rate as their majority counterparts. Javits Grants are part of a small federal program providing funding for direct service research and demonstration projects. The purpose of the grants is to resolve the problems in identifying and meeting the needs of underrepresented gifted populations. Herein is a description of Project LEAP, which was designed to identify and meet the needs of rural high school students who have gifts, talents, or high potential. The project was funded for three years. The information provided in this discussion was collected through on-site interviews with all project staff and written reports from students at the end of each project year. The project was planned with four conceptual goals: community collaboration, partnership with parents, culturally relevant identification, and appropriate curriculum. Two themes emerged from an analysis of the interview and project documentation data regarding the implementation of the four Project goals: (a) the rural linkages that existed and were forged and (b) the authenticity infused into all project activities to discover and nurture gifts, talents, or high potential. © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

A persistent concern in the field of gifted education is the widespread underrepresentation of minority students in programs designed to meet the needs of students who are gifted (Ford & Harris, 1990, 1999; Frasier, 1997; Passow & Frasier, 1996). Underrepresentation of native American Indian students is attributed to several factors: need for appropriate measures (George, 1987), need for cultural responsiveness (Montgomery, 1989), need for appropriate language and relevant cultural characteristics (Peacock, 1979), need to accommodate the predominantly rural nature of schools providing educational options for Indian children and youth (Spicker, Fletcher, Montgomery, & Breard, 1993), and a need to address alternative learning styles (McCarty, Lynch, Wallace, & Benally, 1991). Additionally, a critical need for a multicultural curriculum for all gifted students has been identified (Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1999). Apparently, the complexity of these needs precludes a simple solution to the problem of underrepresentation of Indian students receiving gifted services. They continue to be underrepresented and underserved in gifted programs despite more than 30 years of discussion and analysis of the problem.

Rural communities have historically found it difficult to offer the range of programs necessary to meet the needs of gifted Indian students (Bull, 1987; Kleinsasser, 1988; Pitts, 1986). Several reasons are offered for the problems that rural schools experience with disproportionate representation of minorities in special programs. The two most prominent reasons are the heavy reliance on standardized test scores of academic achievement and the limited number of culturally and linguistically diverse school professionals (De Leon & Argus-Calvo, 1997; Spicker, Southern, & Davis, 1987). Increasing the number of Indian teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, psychologists, or other school personnel may provide Indian students greater access to educational opportunity.

Discussions of minorities and gifted students sometimes overlook the unique concerns of the Indian student. For example, an important book on gifted adolescents (Bireley & Genshaft, 1991)
includes three chapters describing the unique issues faced by African American, Hispanic, Asians and Pacific Islanders. No mention is made of Indian adolescents despite the fact that Indian teenagers face issues that are unique to their cultural group. For instance, the Indian adolescent belongs to two nations, the United States and their tribe (a sovereign nation). This status alone creates a set of identity issues unique to the Indian adolescent.

Although Indians comprise only 1% of the U.S. population, many public schools, particularly those in rural areas or in southwestern states, have an Indian population as high as 50% or more. In the rural school areas served by Project LEAP, well over half of the community population was Indian and over half of the school population was Indian. Yet, in some of the schools, there were no Indian students in the programs designed for students who are gifted.

Project LEAP was developed by a rural community cooperative to remedy the issues of underrepresentation of Indian students in gifted programs in community schools. The focus was to meet the needs of its children and youth with gifts, talents, or high potential, particularly those students belonging to local tribes. It was initiated in four area high schools. The project included a multifaceted approach to academic achievement with four major components: identification, curriculum, parent involvement, and collaboration. What follows here is a description of the project and the results of an analysis of the data collected in interviews with project staff regarding their perceptions of the project in terms of effectiveness. The analysis suggests that the success of the project was the result of two major factors: authentic discovery and rural linkages. Authenticity in providing opportunities for students to demonstrate potential meant a flexibility and honesty in the determination of who would benefit from the program and its differentiated curriculum. The linkages common to a rural area included a communication among and between the schools, teachers, students, parents, and the small communities.

**Project LEAP Overview**

Project LEAP was designed to respond to the needs of gifted students enrolled in secondary schools in rural areas or those geographically isolated and sparsely populated. LEAP is an acronym for Leadership Excellence Achievement and Performance. These four program initiatives represent the strengths of the students in rural high schools, are interrelated, and provided direction for the project goals. Leadership was defined as the involvement of students in the school and community in socially responsible activities. Documentation of involvement included logs, newspaper articles, and artifacts (products) constructed with community leaders. Excellence was determined to represent the strengths of rural students and rural communities. In addition to academic content areas, such as writing, language, or science, strengths included art, music, drama, and dance; agriculture and animal husbandry; and tribal leadership, cultural awareness, and Indian traditions. Students maintained a collection of their curricular and extracurricular activities to demonstrate the ways they were involved in family, school, and community. The project started such collections with information that assisted in identification and encouraged students to continue to contribute products, artifacts, and other information to the portfolio. Achievement included assisting student to explore avenues of academic success and college entrance. Information was collected regarding which students took college entrance exams, applied for college entrance, and attended college the first year out of high school. Performance was the initiative that reflected a value of accomplishment in the life of each student. It was a broad initiative that was thought to build a learner’s self-efficacy in an area with specific attention to academic performance as a result of program participation. The initiative was designed to ensure a routine of basic skills in reading, writing, and career development concurrently with a depth of knowledge and skills in culture. Performance related to all data collected, but interview data and student program evaluation narratives revealed the intrapersonal aspect of student outcome.
Project LEAP was designed to increase the involvement and identification of Indian students in educational services for gifted students. The results of the project, however, suggest ways to identify and serve all rural or geographically isolated students who are gifted and face other challenges, such as limited English proficiency, having disabilities, or being a minority, culturally diverse, or economically deprived. The purpose of the curriculum was to fully develop intellectual, creative, artistic, and/or leadership abilities. Project LEAP was designed to serve as a model program for potential replication in rural districts with similar populations throughout Indian country in the United States.

Project LEAP was a Javits Gifted and Talented Students’ Educational Grant Program. The funding for Javits projects has had as its focus populations of children and youth who are underrepresented in programs for gifted learners. The project communities are impoverished, rural, and isolated. Approximately 64% of the 7,000 residents in these communities are documented Indian people. Indian students represent 57% of the total school enrollments. All four high school sites had a large enrollment of low-income families (an average of 53%) and limited-English-proficient students (62%). The target students identified for Project LEAP were not identified for or served within programs for gifted students using conventional methods. LEAP was developed with the four project goals of collaboration, identification, curriculum development and delivery, and community/parent involvement.

Collaboration

The four participating districts represent nearly a dozen small rural schools that are part of a countywide cooperative organized to effectively serve students in a cost-efficient manner. The cooperative has an infrastructure that identifies needs and seeks resources to respond to the needs of its member districts. The collaborative arrangement permits a greater range of educational services than any one district might be able to afford. Additionally, it promotes a collaboration of school administrators to work together to plan programs and arrange for funding of the programs planned.

Another aspect of collaboration in the project was the relationship of the project personnel. Some were housed at the cooperative, and some were site-based at local high schools. An Educational Assistance Team implemented program instructional activities. The team included a Project Director, three Resource Specialists, and three Educational Assistants. The Resource Specialists were itinerant, dividing their time among the target districts. The Educational Assistants were site-based. The Resource Specialists were trained in gifted education ranging from in-service training (at least six weeks of intensive training as part of the grant) to a specialization area in a master’s degree program. The collaboration of the Resource Specialists within each school was planned to occur in weekly meetings and staffing with other project staff and interested teachers at each high school. Therefore, as the Resource Specialists were trained in gifted education, they in turn provided consultation and training to the schools.

In addition to the training in gifted education, the Resources Specialists were state-certified teachers of Indian heritage. Although not all were full-blood Indian, nor did all claim to have been raised in traditional Indian ways, they were actively learning about their cultural backgrounds from family, community, and elders. Other Indian personnel at the schools, including the Educational Assistants who were not state-certified teachers, became involved in the project because of the cultural adaptations to curriculum and the rich cultural components woven throughout all project activities. The collaborative process provided the needed Indian mentors and Indian role models to students (De Leon & Argus-Calvo, 1997). In addition, it increased the cultural skills available to project staff.
Identification

At the end of its third year, the project had served over 120 students in Grades 9–12 in four small rural high schools from separate school districts, with 60% of these students self-identified as Indian. Identification of gifts, talents, or high potential was by necessity an ongoing process for project staff at all four schools. During the first month of each of the three project years, work focused on gathering identification data. Data included writing samples, an interest survey, and portfolio samples, in addition to the classic standardized test scores and grades. Of the students served by Project LEAP, 87% were students who were never served by conventional2 gifted programs at their school district. Project staff, in collaboration with administration and teachers in the schools, developed the screening and identification process. Although implemented somewhat differently at each school, the following information was collected and included in the matrix: grade point average, achievement test composite score, individual achievement test subtest score, teacher rating scales and nomination, peer rating scales and nomination, teacher or parent narrative, analysis of Student Survey (an interest inventory developed by project staff), student product analysis, and Identification Review Team recommendation.

Although a numerical value was assigned to most information as criteria, it was not used for normative ranking to determine placement in the program. Normal weighting procedures were not followed at any school. Rather, a case study approach in which all information from the matrix, various narrative accounts, and an evaluation of portfolio of student product was the final determination for placement in the program. Furthermore, the information gathered for the portfolio served as an indicator of continuation in the program. Project students maintained their own portfolios to reflect student growth and progress throughout their involvement in the Project. Artifacts related to project activities, products developed, and journal entries were collected. The project duration was three years for a small number of tenth graders who were identified in the first year of the program. The portfolios assisted teachers and students to make decisions about curriculum development, evaluation, and future goals. Each student in Project LEAP contributed to his or her admissions portfolio data to exit the project with academic or professional documentation. As a strategy to promote continued interest in college, a Career Portfolio was developed to focus on educational goals and planning for the future. The project staff continually monitored the portfolios and other indicators of student success to alter and modify program activities.

The authenticity of the identification process is evident in the use of the student portfolio. Project evaluation data demonstrate that over half of the students placed in the program would not qualify if only quantitative data, specifically test scores and grades, were used. Many conventional programs use only data that is available for all students in an effort to allow equal access to gifted services. This equal treatment results in the greatest inequity. Rather, a process was enacted in this program for collecting data that portrayed the strength of each student. The process included soliciting information from alternative sources, such as people who knew the student outside of the school setting. In addition, information was used that required subjective evaluation from others. This process provides greater equity to students who do not demonstrate their gifts, talents, or high potential in the conventional methods that have systematically excluded minority learners. It is important to note that equity and fairness were granted to each student in a way that relied less upon relative standing in statistically normative terms than on authentic identification of the individual needs of students.

2Because of the cultural meaning of the word “traditional,” it is consciously avoided in this context for describing the usual processes for gifted programs designed and implemented in the last few decades without concern for cultural diversity. For Indian people, the word traditional means living in the Indian ways.
Curriculum

Project LEAP provided students with individualized instruction within six specially developed study units. The study units incorporated and encouraged growth in all phases of school life. The project curriculum consists of challenging content and performance standards in the core subjects designed to raise students’ achievement; however, most activities would qualify as enrichment or enhancement to the general curriculum. Project personnel and community leaders provided support to enhance leadership skills, establish high academic goals, improve evidence of achievement, and promote development of talent performance. The study units, designed to enhance, enrich, and extend the general curriculum, were focused in six areas: Pre-college Orientation; Career Education; Motivation and Self-Esteem; Cultural Heritage of the Indian Tribes of the area; Writing Skills, Prose and Poetry; and Research Skills. The units introduced goals and activities in LEAP sessions or Saturday seminars. Work in the general classes continued based on the support received from the high school teachers. Most teachers provided time and adaptations for the curricular units or were willing to release students to attend more LEAP sessions. All unit guides were written with a specific focus to utilize language and culture of the Indian tribes represented by the community.

As a result of participating in the differentiated curriculum, project students demonstrated an overall increase in performance on ACT/SAT scores. In some cases, the increase was overwhelming. For example, one student who had no intention of taking the ACT before participating in LEAP, scored 19 on the first examination and 26 the second time. All Project LEAP students were encouraged to take the ACT, with greater numbers of ninth and tenth graders accepting the invitation. For example, whereas before Project LEAP no high school students took the PSAT, several in each high school tried it at least once. Twice as many students took the ACT repeatedly to improve their scores after taking the preparation lessons within the Pre-college Orientation Unit. Scores increased with each subsequent retake. The lasting effect of the project is that students realize that they now have access to college entrance exams.

Another outcome of the project curriculum was the statistically significant increase in the number of students applying for college admission. As part of an activity planned in the curriculum, LEAP students as seniors submitted applications to college. Letters from colleges and universities show that no student was denied admission to college; however, not all students chose to attend the colleges where they were accepted for admission. Some chose other initial career paths, including vocational-technical schools, employment, or the armed services. Project LEAP provided extensive information about colleges and careers, particularly through the Career Fair that was developed and delivered each year to encourage college and career exploration for project students. In addition, the Pre-college Orientation Unit included visits to a university campus, guest speakers, Internet access to university information, and other valuable resources. Perhaps this information is routinely disseminated in urban schools or to gifted students in small schools. The project students, however, clearly stated that they would not have thought about college if not for the project curriculum. Project staff worked closely with the school counselors, students, and parents to provide assistance with college applications, financial aid, and scholarship applications. In each project year, all of the seniors (100%) in the project applied for some degree of financial aid and/or scholarships as they applied for college admission.

Curriculum and lesson plans were developed to respond to student needs according to assessed strengths and interests. Knowledge and achievement were documented through portfolio assessment, and assessment rubrics were developed to demonstrate growth. The authenticity of the process was evident in the way that student progress was tracked individually and conferences were held with students and/or parents as needed. For students whose achievement in school is
normally ignored, neglected, or accepted as mediocre, the individual attention and high expectations “changed lives” (according to one Indian teacher). Likewise, students reported knowing that someone at school cared whether or not they were doing their work or planning a future.

Community and Parent Involvement

Important linkages in rural communities include relationships within the schools and outside of the school as well. Both linkages were well planned for Project LEAP. The internal schools linkages included extensive professional development of project and school-based staff. Individual teachers variously received the enthusiasm and effort of the project staff, but the climate of the schools was generally accepting and supportive.

For small schools in rural areas, close ties to the community and parents are important to foster (Bull, 1987; Helge, 1981). Project LEAP kept the community informed of project activities through news releases, photos in local newspapers, community events, and student service learning projects. A strong parent education component was correlated with each of the study units with many parents getting involved in activities with the school for the first time. The project had as one of its goals to develop parental awareness, understanding, and involvement with abilities and needs of their child by providing parents with information and educational assistance. One area that was innovative to typical school practices for these students and their parents was the knowledge of the options available for their child’s future educational needs. Informing and involving parents achieved greater support for their children’s educational progress and continuation in school.

The project distributed evaluation surveys to project parents that measured opinions regarding parent-training sessions that were held in conjunction with the six curricular units. The surveys allowed recipients to rate the training on a scale from 0 to 5 (0 = very poor, 1 = poor, 2 = adequate, 3 = fair, 4 = good, and 5 = excellent). Talled survey results indicated that the overall success of the Project parent training was rated “good” to “excellent.” Project staff presented program information at the various parent orientation meetings. Of the parents who participated, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Efforts must be consciously planned in order to encourage greater parent participation at the high school level, particularly for Indian families who may not feel welcomed by the school as they remember their own educational experiences.

Results and Discussion

Interviews with the Educational Specialists, Project Director, and students were conducted at the end of each Project year. Field notes were taken for all interviews, which lasted nearly 2 hours with staff and about 30 minutes with students. Interviews with staff were tape-recorded. Additional field notes were written when audiotapes were reviewed. Students often provided written narratives of their experiences and reactions to the project. The field notes, augmented field notes, and student narratives were analyzed for general themes, categories, or patterns to determine areas of success or ways to improve service delivery. Two themes—general conceptual patterns or broadly defined components that contributed to Project LEAP meeting its goals—emerged from the analysis of interview and narrative information: the authenticity in identification and service delivery and the collaborative linkages among and between the schools and community.

Authentic Discovery

Although an elaborate system of collecting, analyzing, and utilizing individual identification data was implemented, the value in providing unique pieces of information to demonstrate
individual needs of students remained a priority. Grade point averages, standardized test scores, and rating scales were collected and calculated to provide information to the profile for students who ranked or rated high in such measures. At the same time, and more importantly, students who expressed an interest, curiosity, or skill were encouraged to “show up,” “contribute,” or “produce.” Students were afforded services based on demonstrated or potential need, rather than space in a restricted program. The portfolio contributed to documentation of need and allowed authentic assessment strategies to be continued in the curriculum.

Project staff respected the boundaries of identification procedures, but did not allow the rules to get in the way of individual students getting services. For example, it was common for a LEAP student to bring a friend to project activities or for students to show up based on what they have heard or read in the newspaper. The level of involvement of all students—“identified” or “visiting” was identical. This approach is consistent with what Herring (1996) suggests as a more humanistic view of providing services for indigenous gifted students.

Rural Linkages

Several linkages contributed to the success of Project LEAP. Some already existed, such as the administrative linkages among the high schools through the infrastructure of the cooperative. In addition, each member of the Educational Assistance Team established linkages with and between students, parents, communities, and other projects that contributed to the success of Project LEAP. Exit interviews with staff, interviews with students and teachers, and on-site observations revealed strong bonds among project staff, students, and other not receiving direct services in the project. The boundaries that typically demarcate those students in the gifted program and those students not in the program were diminished in importance. Project staff held numerous special events, service learning projects, and activities associated with curricular unites that were open to all interested students.

Linkages among and between students and teachers, and Project LEAP were evident in all facets of the project. One example is the Career Fair, which involved LEAP and non-LEAP students. Other events commonly held were planned by a lead school, but supported by Project LEAP, other federally funded projects, Title VII Bilingual Education Programs, or the Title IX Indian Education Programs. In addition to the project links, the communication links were apparent with other faculty members at each school, with families of students in all schools, and with all students at each site.

An important characteristic of rural schools is the necessity for teachers, administrators, and project staff to hold more than one position (Helge, 1981; Putnam, 1986). This characteristic contributes to the success of providing more services to more Indian students. Project staff were able to work with many different students without having to delimit the type and nature of the work done with Project students. In other words, a student did not have to guarantee a label of gifted in order to participate in the differentiated curriculum, specifically many activities related to college preparation and cultural awareness, because the teacher might bring together two differently identified groups of students for the same activity due to her role in two programs. The focus of meeting individual needs was a priority and supported by the multiple positions held by rural school personnel.

The project was able to maintain continuity in its connections with school and community by retaining the quality of project staff that valued the important linkages within, between, and outside of the high school involved. Although some personnel changes were made throughout the project, continuity and qualifications remained high. The professional expertise and Indian heritage of the project staff were strong factors in the positive responses to the program by students, parents, teachers, and administrators at the four participating sites. Indian parents would often
work with Indian Educational Specialists for developing culturally relevant products or activities. Swisher (1998) believes that Indians are best able to discover and disseminate the research necessary to meet the educational needs of Indian students and “must be given the authority to research and write about Indian education” (p. 193).

**Summary**

Project LEAP was able to solve its underrepresentation problem and identify and serve the needs of its gifted Indian high school students in proportion to the number of Indian students attending the high schools. It demonstrated flexibility and authenticity in its educational services to identify and serve all students.

Communication linkages of Project LEAP with other programs within the target districts were facilitated through the infrastructure common to rural districts. The cooperative agency that served as the administrative unit for Project LEAP in the schools has a unique administrative status in education. It serves as the coordinator for multiple programs within the districts and is able to integrate professional development, parental involvement, multicultural activities, acquisition of technology, technology training, and many other aspects of education in a cost-effective and collaborative manner.

**References**


