The underrepresentation of English language learners in programs for gifted and talented students shows schools' lack of ability to identify these students adequately. Some of the reasons for the lack of representation include: (a) the presence of systematic bias in the standardization process, as instruments and approaches follow a middle-class mainstream basis of measurement; (b) the pervasive lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of teachers and appraisers due to inadequate training; and (c) the common practice of identifying gifted and talented students on the basis of a single test administration.

Population forecasts indicate that, while the total number of public school students is decreasing across the nation, the number of Hispanic students is growing. Schools with high minority student enrollment are also growing. Despite these demographic trends, few gifted and talented English language learners benefit from special services. Therefore, developing relevant identification procedures and instructional practices for these students is an urgent need in education.

Identifying Gifted and Talented English Language Learners

It is common knowledge that language minority students are left out of the identification process because the initial screening step consists of a standardized measure that does not reflect the linguistic and cultural characteristics of some student populations. No single solution can achieve this complex goal. But, multiple identifying sources are effective, including nominations from teachers, students and parents; translations of standardized tests; teacher and parent observations of creative behaviors and exceptional abilities; and information gained through value-derived scales representing salient characteristics appreciated within the subculture.

However, these instruments are not free from bias. Parents do not seem to be able to objectively assess their children as they view them either as “run-of-the-mill” or “top of the heap” with little understanding of the many ramifications of their judgment. In addition, teachers tend to be influenced by grades and standardized scores or by transcultural comparisons that cloud their decisions (i.e., “comparing apples and oranges”). Finally, self assessment by students seems to be affected by what others (e.g., peers, parents, teachers) think of the student. Therefore, it seems necessary to avoid relying on a single information source and to clarify giftedness for school personnel as well as for parents, so that gifted and talented English language learners can be properly identified.

Strategies for Planning Adequate Identification Practices

Parting from the premise that all children have the potential for giftedness, ensuring opportunities for these gifts to develop should be an educational priority. Teachers must generate a multiple source assessment record for each student with formal and informal data, including work samples. The following steps can be useful in gathering information.

Collect background data and work samples for each student. Determine the language proficiency of the student, cultural and socio-economic background, home environment, parental education level and school involvement. Important inferences that can facilitate the interpretation of additional data included in the assessment records can be drawn from this information. If the educator is unfamiliar with the implications of the background data of the student, it will be helpful to request assistance from members of the child's
cultural enclave. Additionally, work samples from home and school could be enlightening in assessing language development and creativity.

**Observe the child’s language and social behaviors.** Make use of a gifted and talented English language learner’s behavioral profile to determine if any of these behaviors show potential for giftedness. Add to the profile by requesting parental input on how the child is perceived and how he or she acts at home. A community member can also serve as a source of input if parents are unavailable.

**Examine cultural and linguistic behaviors of the child and determine if they can be obscuring the child’s potential giftedness.** For example, student A is quiet, retiring and hardly asks questions. The initial teacher reaction is to pronounce him or her as not bright, not curious or not interested. However, these behaviors may be a result of the child’s language fluency level or of inhibition resulting from particular cultural canons (e.g., “Don’t speak unless spoken to”).

**Consider all nominations.** If nominations have been offered, consider them as part of the student identification records. Note characteristics that reappear in these instruments and in the behavioral and linguistic inventories.

**Examine standardized test scores in light of the demographic data** collected on the student. Determine if these scores are consistent with the rest of the information collected. If bias is evident, use these scores as a teaching tool as they are indicative of what the student must learn.

**Draw a profile of the student and determine placement** based on the traits emerging from the previous information compared with profiles offered in the research literature on culturally and linguistically diverse students. This information enables educators to determine whether the student should be recommended for a talent pool to be monitored for later entry into a gifted and talented program or if he or she should be recommended for participation at the present time.

Existing biases and lack of awareness regarding gifted and talented English language learners have hindered the process of determining the most appropriate identification, placement and instruction procedures and have led to identification procedures that only spotlight students who most apparently fit the norm used by the schools. These factors, coupled with escalating school dropout rates, particularly for Hispanic youth, are indicators that schools have failed to adequately serve these students.

Gifted and talented English language learners have joined the ranks of the population at-risk of dropping out of school as, more often than not, they are victims of unchallenging strategies and materials that do not entice them to stay in school. The suggestions offered in this article are not to be conceived as an effort to standardize the process of identifying and instructing gifted and talented English language learners. They are a set of guidelines to assist teachers and other school personnel in better serving this population.

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