Talents, Schooling, and English Language Learners

*Talent and Diversity: The Emerging World of Limited English Proficient Students in Gifted Education - August 1998*

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When Jo Ann Robisheaux was teaching elementary school students whose first language was not English, she confesses that her perceptions of students’ abilities—despite her best efforts and her progressive attitudes about language learning—were nonetheless colored by their limited ability to communicate in their second language. The case of Carla, a fourth-grader with 2 years of English and low grades, changed her mind.

When assigned to write acrostic poems about their native countries, Carla recalled her life in Honduras and created the following poem:

*How wonderful it was*

*On the boat*

*Near the mouth of the river at*

*Dawn. The sun was pointing at me*

*Under the roof of the boat. The*

*River was wonderful when the sun was pointing at me*

*And the boat was soft in the water,*

*Soft, very soft in the water.*

(Robisheaux, 1997)

Carla’s imaginative and emotionally evocative use of language provoked Robisheaux into a whole new understanding of students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As a result, she reports, she turned her attention to what she now sees as a profound intersection between gifted education and Limited English Proficient. She began to broaden identification procedures in her school so that LEP students would not be labeled “slow learners,” or be consigned to low-level knowledge, with scant opportunities to exercise their talents. At the same time, she began investigating the teaching strategies that were recommended for gifted students and adapted those strategies for LEP students.

But educators like Robisheaux, who presented her research on LEP students and gifted education at the OERI/OBEMLA Initiative on Limited English Proficient Students With Outstanding Talents Meeting (January 30–31, 1997) in Washington, DC, remain relatively uncommon. While some educators from gifted education and some from bilingual education labor to expand gifted education’s parameters and improve the quality of schooling for LEP students, others may consider the problem too complex to solve but still be troubled by the current status of LEP students in American schools. Still others report witnessing less than equitable school practices, but see little avenue for improvement within existing school structures.

Meanwhile, students like Carla continue to enroll in school. What is the world of LEP students in most American schools, and what happens to them if they have extraordinary talents?
Gifted Education and Limited English Proficient Students

Few educators would disagree that Limited English Proficient students often face an environment that is incongruent with their previous experiences when they enter many American schools. Pressure from teachers, administrators, and their American peers to assimilate into U.S. culture can lead to a profound disconnect between home and life in the outside world for LEP students. A scarcity of strong, progressive bilingual education programs firmly rooted in the best research on language acquisition also can contribute to these students’ alienation—an estrangement from both home and school.

More likely than their nonminority peers to come from conditions of persistent poverty, Hispanic LEP students, in particular, are also much more likely to disengage from school entirely (Hispanic Dropout Project 1996). Unchallenged by curricula that seem dull and irrelevant to their lives and bereft of a healthy sense of future, these students suffer a shockingly high dropout rate that persists at approximately 30 percent (NCES 1996). While it is impossible to infer how many of these students have outstanding talents, it is clear that an unacceptable number of young people truncate their schooling prematurely and are swallowed up in low-paying jobs without opportunity for advancement—with little sense of who they might have become with different school experiences. As a result, a boundless potential resource is lost.

Of course, some LEP students do succeed, despite daunting odds. But while Horatio Alger stories are heartwarming—accounts of individuals who triumph over adversity and succeed despite all odds—most educators agree that securing a top-quality, challenging, and supportive education should not become yet another hurdle for students to scale. In fact, an education that sufficiently challenges and prepares youth for productive roles in an increasingly complicated society—economically, technologically, and interpersonally—is what most people espouse. Anything less, they contend, is not democratic.

Yet, even when LEP students engage eagerly in school and are fortunate enough to experience high-quality bilingual education, there is considerable evidence that gaining access to high-status knowledge is especially difficult for them, (Lockwood 1997a; National Research Council 1997). Too often these students are slated automatically for low tracks or general courses because their limited English language skills fuel a perception that they are less intelligent or able. Even when educators have the best intentions, unless they are schooled in bilingual education and the most progressive theories on language acquisition, they may argue that LEP students are simply too difficult to teach because of their varying English language skills or because their family and cultural backgrounds do not mesh with those of school staff. It is almost impossible, they may contend, to offer them challenging content, hold high expectations for their achievement, and provide a supportive experience to propel them toward success.

Educators and policymakers also struggle with ongoing issues of racism—both overt and subtle—that may affect whether Limited English Proficient students are held to the same expectations as other students. Some educators may err because their intentions are benign—but ultimately misguided. Rather than establishing a demanding, yet nurturant, environment for Limited English Proficient students, they may find themselves so sympathetic with the economic plight or English language difficulties their students experience that they soften their expectations. In some cases, both bilingual and gifted educators simply may not consider their students as candidates for gifted programs, particularly when they need to identify students with outstanding abilities in mathematics, science, and language arts.

How might English language learners be identified for the programs they need if the sole measures for identification are standardized measures that demand facility in English? If additional measures exist that are attentive to cultural and linguistic bias, how can both bilingual and gifted educators ensure that LEP student’s aptitudes in mathematics, science, and language arts are identified? Or, once identified, what responsibility should be taken by staff and program administrators to aid in their success in gifted programs?

In this monograph, we explore key issues related to the inclusion and education of LEP students in gifted and talented programs. Although some bilingual educators may entertain a certain antipathy for gifted programs because their students are often underrepresented, they actually share an educational kinship with their colleagues in gifted education. Both gifted education and bilingual education have become highly politicized; both are particularly vulnerable to funding vagaries; and both have become targets for critics who assert that neither educative effort is
necessary. In addition, and most important, educators in both gifted education and bilingual education share a common concern that a vast potential resource of students may be untapped, uneducated, and ultimately lost.

We first outline the arguments advanced for gifted education and lay out the criticisms it endures. Second, we present information about the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive development. Third, we discuss the nature of giftedness. What does it mean to be gifted, to bear special talents? What special implications does "giftedness" bear for LEP students? Fourth, we turn to the identification of potentially gifted students and the special difficulties this presents when students are English language learners. Finally, we look at the starting points for change and what building and district levers might prove most effective.

Gifted Education: Advocates and Critics

Gifted education is one of the most hotly debated entities on the American educational landscape. What exactly is it and why has it become so controversial?

*Gifted education is not one seamless entity, a rigid template that does not vary from school to school.* In some schools, giftedness is viewed broadly. Proponents of this view prefer to speak of talent development or multiple intelligences, and hold that almost every student has some special aptitude or interest that needs enrichment (Gardner 1983; Renzulli & Reis 1985; Sternberg 1995, 1996). In other schools, gifted education has a much narrower, exclusive meaning. In these schools and districts, students are usually identified for gifted programs through the use of IQ score cut-offs. As an unfortunate consequence, these programs may contain disproportionate numbers of students who are homogeneous in their backgrounds, due to factors that are irrelevant to the talents being sought or that mask student gifts, such as test bias, test-taking skills, and cultural congruence with the questions posed on standardized tests. Of course, gifted programs may also fall somewhere between these two views of giftedness.

While educators in gifted education may disagree about identification procedures and the meaning of giftedness, they usually agree that the primary purpose of gifted education is to meet the unique educational needs of either exceptionally bright or talented students or the exceptional talents that students have to the maximum degree possible. They contend that the regular curriculum does not allow these students sufficient avenues to expand their talent and abilities, and that students whose abilities are not tapped sufficiently will not meet their potential (OERI 1993). In fact, they argue, there is evidence that students with special academic aptitude or multiple talents may disengage from school entirely—discouraged and alienated by instruction that is unresponsive to their needs.

Proponents of gifted education point to underachieving students and low academic standards. They maintain that without adequate educational experiences that challenge high ability students, a vast resource will be lost to American society (OERI 1993). While they do not take issue with the contention that education needs to improve for all students, they have particular concern with those bearing special talents—those they see as most likely to benefit society in a variety of leadership, creative, and artistic capacities.

Critics of gifted education, on the other hand, perceive it as something special that nurtures the elite—an example of a cold-hearted meritocracy in action. They contend that the route to academic success for all students is to improve the regular curriculum and the quality of educational experiences offered to all children (Oakes 1985; Sapon-Shevin 1994). These critics perceive the special structural arrangements extended to gifted programs, such as pullout classes, Saturday school, or completely separate gifted classes, as hurtful and unjust with little academic merit. While they may agree that the existing curriculum will not challenge students sufficiently to provoke future success, they believe that there is no reason students with special aptitudes cannot thrive in regular classrooms if a concerted effort is made to improve the quality of educational life in those classrooms.

Bilingualism and Cognitive Development

Just as the merits of gifted education continue to be debated, so do the benefits of bilingualism. For example, the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive development is frequently misunderstood. As Hakuta points out (1990), there is a lingering belief in many quarters that bilingualism is something negative, rather than something positive. This
conviction, he argues, stems from long-held attitudes about immigrants as somehow inferior to mainstream Americans even though the United States is predominately a nation of immigrants.

Despite this view, there is a significant body of research that shows that bilingualism is associated positively with greater cognitive flexibility. In comparisons of bilingual and monolingual children, there is evidence that bilingualism leads to what Hakuta terms "superior performance on a variety of intellectual skills".

Research indicates that there is a positive association between bilingualism and cognitive development. Concepts learned in a native language transfer to the second language without the need to learn them all over again. In other words, if a child learns a scientific concept in Spanish, the concept is learned and does not need to be relearned in English. Therefore, this is an advantage for students also retain their fluency in their native tongue.

Although this may seem obvious, misconceptions about bilingualism may lead to the disproportionate placement of Limited English Proficient students in remedial programs simply because they lack full proficiency in English. This has obvious implications for LEP students with unique aptitudes, because buried in remedial programs, they may never reach their potential and, in fact, may leave school early.

What Does It Mean To Be Gifted?

Just as gifted education looks different in different settings, notions of giftedness vary. Increasingly, educators are moving toward an expanded definition of giftedness or away from the term entirely in favor of a view that sees intelligence as multifaceted and talent development as essential for all students (Gardner 1983; Renzulli & Reis 1985; Sternberg 1995, 1996). In particular, the research and work of Howard Gardner, Joseph Renzulli, and Robert Sternberg has been instrumental in guiding the educational community toward an expanded view of intelligence and ability.

For example, Gardner posited the existence of multiple intelligences, which range from mathematical intelligence to intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner 1983; Lockwood 1997b). Renzulli argues that the term "gifted" be avoided entirely as it carries an elitist meaning and label that only alienates students and families not identified (Lockwood 1997b). He also contends that talent development is the task for all schools and believes that if sufficient enrichment experiences are provided for all students, substantive educational reform will follow. Sternberg has developed a triarchic theory of intelligence (1995). In his work, he emphasizes the importance of viewing youth as composites of multiabilities, which means that instruction must shift to accommodate a multidimensional view of intelligence, rather than emphasizing purely analysis and memory.

The eagerness with which some schools have greeted this expanded view of intelligence suggests that many educators find these theories and research findings validated in their experience and congruent with the democratic ideals of schooling. In a remarkably short period of time, for example, entire programs have been built around Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory (Lockwood 1997b). Expanded views of intelligence also seem to calm the equity versus excellence argument central to any discussions of special programs such as gifted and talented education.

Some educators argue that being bilingual is itself a special ability, intelligence, or "gift." They point to the constant negotiation that LEP students must make between two linguistic worlds and cultures, the problem solving, and the sophisticated code-switching such linguistic intelligence requires. In some schools, many LEP students—at a very young age—actually function as translators between their families and school staff, although this practice is viewed as unfortunate and exploitative by some when carried too far.

Bilingual educators also can make a convincing case that some languages carry higher status than others and this has direct implications for how LEP students are viewed in U.S. schools. Languages common to LEP students, such as Spanish or many of the multitude of Asian languages now represented in U.S. schools, typically are not seen as high-status languages, probably because they are associated with populations more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status. The student who becomes fluent in French or Japanese, however, is much more likely to find such linguistic proficiency commended and rewarded and is also much more likely to be in a higher economic status (Lockwood 1997a).
Identifying Talent and Abilities

Although identification of students for gifted and talented programs continues to be a conundrum with which educators struggle, Limited English Proficient students are affected most severely. In fact, most LEP students fall outside the purview of schools almost entirely when students are identified for gifted and talented programs. If standardized tests or IQ tests are used exclusively, students’ English language aptitude and cultural differences will influence their scores. Even if other measures are used, language can influence student scores if directions are given in English, rather than the native language.

In addition, researchers at the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented have identified other barriers to the identification of LEP and minority students, which include:

- teachers’ inability to recognize indicators of potential giftedness,
- lack of a stimulating early home environment, more frequent for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and
- teachers prejudicial attitudes (Frasier et al. 1995, x-xi).

Perhaps the most profound factor that affects the identification of LEP students for gifted programs is the difficulty that school staff have in identifying unique abilities in LEP students. This inability, the researchers argue, is affected by cultural bias in teachers inexperienced in cultural differences that may affect learning styles or parental attitudes toward school. The extent to which teachers and other school staff can become comfortable with the home cultures and ethnicities of their LEP students can result in a greater awareness and early recognition of outstanding abilities.

The same researchers (Frasier et al., 1995) concluded that although there is a popular teacher-held perception that parents of LEP students do not involve their children in educational activities at home that support their in-school studies, that belief is actually often incorrect. Again, increasing teachers’ knowledge bases on the home cultures of LEP students should aid in more positive home-school interactions and perceptions of LEP students’ abilities.

Most progressive gifted educators now agree that just as an expanded view of intelligence and ability is necessary, broader identification of students with outstanding aptitudes must follow. They point to the need for multipronged identification that should include test scores, teacher recommendations, student portfolios, and consideration of special variables—such as language, socioeconomic background, and culture.

School staff need progressive, substantive staff development to supplement and expand their knowledge of other cultural and linguistic groups. They also need support in learning how giftedness manifests itself within cultural norms. This knowledge, when supported with opportunities to pilot new programs geared toward introducing LEP students to high-status knowledge, will aid both in the development of new identification procedures that, while perhaps imperfect, will result in expanding the numbers of LEP students participating in gifted and talented programs.

Where Do We Begin?: The Levers for Change

"Here we go again—yet another "reform" that will net little." The prospect of yet another educational initiative—making gifted education more authentically inclusive of LEP students with outstanding abilities—may leave educators in both gifted and bilingual education at the least exhausted and at the best bewildered. Understaffed and overworked, it may seem impossible to these school staff to increase the numbers of LEP students in gifted programs and then support them so that they succeed.

Overcoming skepticism and feelings of powerlessness are key to providing inclusive gifted education for Limited English Proficient students. Although national and state initiatives provide the impetus for large-scale reforms, there is something peculiarly American about putting a local stamp on a federal or state initiative. This is abundantly clear in the current case of national content and performance standards, which presently are being tailored to fit local needs in hundreds of districts nationwide.
What, then, are gifted and bilingual educators to do? Some basic starting points are remarkably similar to starting points for any educational reform initiative. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Establishing a cognitive and philosophical shift to a view of youth—including youth not yet proficient in English—as high ability students, with accompanying multipronged identification procedures to identify and nurture youth with outstanding talents.
- Forging a commitment to the long-term social benefit of redesigning gifted education to include and meet the needs of LEP students.
- Collaborating across programs; a willingness to negotiate and entertain different points of view.
- Building on strengths and program maturity.
- Establishing a clear and coherent vision of inclusive gifted education.
- Bringing the issue of LEP students and gifted education to a heightened level of public awareness.
- Creating an action plan with realistic timelines.
- Securing adequate teacher training and inservice, including training in identification procedures for bilingual education teachers.

It should be noted that not all of these variables need to be in place before change begins.

**Viewing youth as high ability; establishing multipronged identification procedures.** If gifted education is to be truly representative of all student populations—and fully harness the talents of all ethnicities, races, and linguistic groups—school staff in all programs must shift their view of intelligence as a single, limited entity to a much broader view of talent and abilities. They need to search aggressively for strong mathematics and science potential among LEP students, rather than limiting themselves to talents that may be more easily identifiable and not confined by language proficiency, such as aptitudes in art and music. As staff begin to make this cognitive shift, they must also make a practical commitment to the use of multipronged identification procedures so that English language learners are not unrecognized. As they make the transition to what may appear to be imperfect identification measures, they can be helped by the recognition that narrow, traditional measures of IQ already severely limit the numbers of youth with talents who are eligible for gifted programs. Rather than becoming mired in an endless debate about the best identification procedures, educators in both gifted and bilingual education need to settle on a working procedure, begin to use it, and continue to refine it as their program grows and changes.

**Committing to the long-term social benefit of redesigning gifted education to include LEP students.** As educators expand their views of ability and intelligence, they also must make a real commitment to the inclusion and education of LEP students in gifted programs. If they pursue their own argument about losing the most able youth because appropriate educational experiences are not available to them, they will find that continuing gifted programs that do not adequately represent LEP youth is an intolerable state of affairs. Since public monies, supporting public education, provide public benefit, this is an especially persuasive rationale for gifted educators who want to reach as many youth with outstanding talents as possible.

**Authentic and productive collaboration.** Almost any reform effort emphasizes the need for school staff to work collaboratively with each other, with parents, and with other members of the community. As Sizer has pointed out, while collaboration is difficult and demanding, it is ultimately rewarding and necessary if programmatic efforts are to avoid parochialism (Lockwood 1997b).

Gifted and bilingual educators can also learn from progressive case studies where gifted programs have undergone significant change or where districts have labored to improve their bilingual education programs. At the systemic level, they can be informed by the experiences of districts and schools who have worked with a national reform, such as Success For All. One important demand such programs place on schools that want to participate in their efforts is that some degree of initial consensus must be secured before schools proceed.

Conference participants agreed that gifted and bilingual educators need to break down barriers between their programs and begin a substantive dialogue with timelines and goals. In other words, brainstorming between programs with no end
in sight is not likely to create change, but brainstorming with a nucleus of motivated personnel from both gifted and bilingual programs—with a timeline that includes discrete actions—is far more likely to produce results.

**Build on strengths.** Rather than waiting for new funding to appear, entrepreneurial educators in both gifted and bilingual education work from their areas of strength. If there is more maturity in bilingual education programs, the change initiative might begin in that program, with cooperation with gifted education. Again, lessons can be learned from national reform efforts, including Success for All and James Comer’s School Development Program, both of which insist that scapegoating and blame placing are completely unproductive and only lead to increased animosity. All problems must become collective and be collectively solved, but distinct responsibilities need to be outlined so that procrastination and postponement do not result.

**Increase public awareness of LEP students and their talents.** The power of the press—and galvanizing public opinion—is a considerable tool that gifted and bilingual educators need to wield. As they begin their collaborative efforts, involving a carefully chosen community team that serves a public relations/outreach role to the media, parents, and other community members can only serve their efforts in a positive fashion. This core team can garner support from a variety of community agencies, seek external funds, solicit ideas, and become a powerful tool to shape the decisions of district administrators and school boards.

**Secure adequate teacher training and professional development.** Although both bilingual education and gifted education are particularly susceptible to funding cuts, a substantial percentage of their budgets needs to be allocated toward adequate teacher training and professional development—particularly as it relates to inclusion and support of LEP students in gifted programs. As conference participants made amply clear, gifted and bilingual educators are usually preoccupied with their own programs. Cross-training in both bilingual education and gifted education is necessary so that teachers are not overwhelmed by new demands placed upon them and have the skills to cope. And if students are housed in bilingual programs where they do not interact with other teachers, it is particularly important that bilingual teachers be skilled advocates for the identification and placement of their students in gifted programs.

Adequate and expert professional development needs to be undertaken—professional development that extends beyond the "one-shot" workshop that offers scant opportunity for teachers to apply new ideas or obtain feedback when they do attempt to shift their teaching in new directions. Districts can utilize school staff from both bilingual and gifted programs, as well as the judicious use of outside authorities to aid in validating their efforts.

**Engage in ongoing evaluation from a variety of sources.** Evaluation, conference participants agreed, is not only necessary, but vital as gifted education expands its parameters to nurture LEP students. How well are programs proceeding? What timeline is realistic? Is there an action timeline, with responsibilities assigned to each person involved in the process? Is district evaluation both quantitative and qualitative? Are gifted and bilingual educators able to obtain additional evaluation from an external source that will inform ongoing efforts? Finally, are school staff prepared to deal with evaluations that are less than 100 percent positive and make necessary program changes? All these questions form the nucleus of plans for evaluation of new efforts to include and nurture LEP students in gifted programs.

Clearly, the case of Limited English Proficient students and their growing role in gifted programs is a knotty and complex topic, but one that is overdue for schools and school staff to address. As demographics tilt to an increasingly multicultural society in the next millennium, the resource of Limited English Proficient students in U.S. schools needs to be identified, nurtured, and encouraged so that contemporary society can benefit from its considerable promise.