Gifted Programming for Poor or Minority Urban Students: **Issues and Lessons Learned**

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The Achievement Gaps

Gaps in the achievement between poor and more advantaged children and minority and nonminority students of all ages continue to be the most central problem in the field of education. Various measures, including grades, standardized test scores, course selections, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, have been used to assess achievement differences, and show that performance gaps by ethnicity (Caucasians vs. African Americans or Hispanic/Latinos) and socioeconomic (SES) status (higher income vs. lower income families) are large, persistent, and troubling to our nation (Education Week, 2007; National Governors Association, 2005). These disparities have been steady over decades and across ages of students.

Racial disparities in academic achievement also are found among the most able students, specifically among high scorers on the SAT-Math and Reading (Miller, 2004). Miller (2004) concludes that "African Americans, Latinos (especially Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans) and Native Americans are currently severely underrepresented among the nation's highest achieving students, by virtually all traditional academic achievement measures, including GPA, class rank, and standardized test scores" (pp. 1–2).

The achievement gap is not limited to nor defined only by differences in achievement by ethnic/racial group; poverty plays a huge role. Wyner, Bridgeland, and DiIulio (2007) tracked the performance of high-achieving lower income and high-achieving upper income students and found disparities at the beginning of elementary school that grew larger over time. Disparities between upper income and lower income high achievers also were found in higher education in terms of college graduation rates, attendance at prestigious colleges, and attainment of graduate degrees. The fact is, most of our minority students in urban areas also are disproportionately low income and thus doubly handicapped.

Further, there is evidence of achievement disparities between minority and majority students within every SES level, as determined by family income and parental education levels (what Miller, 2004, calls the "within-class problem") and particularly at the higher SES levels (the "within-the-top" achievement problem; Miller, 2004). Additionally, likely due to support systems within certain cultures for academic achievement, some low-income groups fare better academically than others. For example, Wyner and colleagues (2007) reported that during high school, lower income high-achieving Asian students were more likely to stay in the top quartile of performance in math, while lower income African American students were less likely to climb into the high achievement level in math and reading.

Urban Gifted

Achievement differences by racial/ethnic group and SES level are especially pronounced and pervasive within our major urban school districts in the United States, although such disparities are not limited to these settings and are found in large suburban districts located close to major cities as well (see the Minority Student Achievement Network: http://www.msanetwork.org). Most of our poor minority children and new immigrants reside in these school districts that are underfunded and struggling to survive. Gifted children within these districts are particularly at risk because they are often overlooked. Indeed, in many instances no gifted programs exist at all (Baker & Friedman-Nimz, 2002), high achievement of students goes unnoticed and unattended to, and the focus of human and other resources is completely on struggling students and preventing dropouts, drug use, and teen pregnancy. An overview of many of the issues that confront poor or minority gifted urban students will be presented. The final sections offer suggestions for those who develop interventions for gifted urban students based on the authors' experiences with a number of projects that serve these students.

Issues With Schooling

Poor children, minority children, and poor minority children are underrepresented in gifted programs. Literature has documented that most of the students qualified for and placed in gifted programs and advanced classes are predominantly Caucasian or Asian students (Bernal, 2002; Ford & Harris, 1999; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Grantham, 2003; Lee, Matthews, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008; Worrell, 2007; Wyner et al., 2007) and that Black students are underrepresented by as much as 55% nationally in gifted programs (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).

Most of our poor minority children find themselves in schools that lack a rigorous curriculum; are less well-equipped in terms of educational resources such as libraries, textbooks, and technology; and often employ less experienced or less qualified teachers (Barton, 2003). And, even if students are in schools with gifted programs, poor minority children are far less likely to be referred by teachers for possible participation in the gifted program, regardless of the ethnicity or race of the person doing the referring. Moreover, the lack of a truly multicultural classroom is believed to affect the achievement of gifted minor-

ity children, affecting students' sense of belonging and validation as scholars (Ford, Howard, Harris, & Tyson, 2000).

Other school-related issues include the confusion about how to identify gifted minority children, because these students may underperform on typically used measures, such as IQ tests or other standardized achievement tests. Strategies to address this problem include incorporating more culturally relevant indicators of ability (e.g., oral expressiveness for verbal ability) into identification protocols (Ford, 1996); the use of performance-based assessments (Sarouphim, 1999; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & de Brux, 2007); the use of nonverbal ability tests (Bracken, VanTassel-Baska, Brown, & Feng, 2007; Ford et al., 2002; Naglieri & Ford, 2003; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007); and the use of different cutoff scores based on appropriate norming groups (Lohman, 2005).

Even if urban schools with high levels of poverty have gifted programs and have appropriate procedures in place to identify students, questions arise as to what to do for students educationally. Often, poor minority children identified with high potential and ability will not succeed in gifted programs that contain predominately high-achieving White students and are heavily verbal in content and focus. Gifted programs must be designed with the needs, strengths, and current achievement levels of these students in mind. In schools systems where there is great diversity with respect to student SES level, race, and achievement, or for programs that pull children from schools across the district, such as full-time gifted schools, the challenge often is one of enabling bright minority or low-SES children to qualify for such programs. Many researchers and educators advocate that minority gifted students participate in preparatory types of educational programs that prepare them to enter advanced and accelerated programs later, as well as protect them from potentially negative peer influences and support their goals and aspirations (Grantham, 2002; Robinson, 2003). These preparatory type programs take different forms, and many supplement schooling with afterschool, summer, and weekend courses. There is some evidence of the success of these supplementary or intervention programs (Baldwin, 1994; Borland & Wright, 1994; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004; Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, Ngoi & Ngoi, 2004).

Psychological and Social Issues

Even when appropriately designed gifted programs are available to minority students, they may choose not to participate. Why? Scholars have identified psychological and social factors that are operative for gifted minority students. These include associating academic achievement with "acting White" and fearing that achievement will be perceived as rejection of one's culture and result in social isolation (Ogbu, 1992). These beliefs may be at the root of what Ford and colleagues (2008) and others (Mickelson, 1990) referred to as the attitude-achievement paradox, where minority students verbally endorse beliefs that education is vital to future success but put little effort into their schoolwork. Black students may agree that in an ideal world, hard work and achievement in school will lead to occupational and financial success, but not for them because of racism and basic inequities in society.

Minority students' reluctance to be placed in gifted programs in urban schools, where they often find themselves as one of only a few minority students surrounded by White and Asian students, has been cited as a mitigating factor of high achievement (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 2000; Morris, 2002; Tatum, 1997). This is referred to as the issue of "fewness" (Miller, 2004) and has been found to exist early in elementary school and continue through all levels of schooling including the faculties of institutions of higher education. This situation has a comprehensive impact on the academic performance of minority students as indicated by data such as SAT scores, GPA, enrollment in advanced classes, and attendance at selective colleges (see Miller, 2004).

Ford and colleagues (2008) studied the attitudes of middle school African American students formally identified as gifted and found that students indeed perceive negative reactions from peers as a result of high achievement; connect "acting White" with school achievement, intelligence, and positive attitudes toward school; and attribute "acting Black" to low school achievement, low intelligence, and negative attitudes toward school. On the other hand, Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee (2010) found that high-ability middle school students enrolled in a supplementary program to prepare them for entrance into honors classes in high school did not perceive negative peer reactions as a result of their involvement in the program. However, supplementary gifted programs may be less stigmatizing than within-school programs and less likely to elicit concerns about accusations of acting White from peers.

Family Issues

The role of the family system in talent development, because of its close proximity to the child (as opposed to community, which is more distal), has been the focus of much attention and

discussion (Bloom, 1985; Subotnik & Jarvin, 2005). Specific parental practices such as closely monitoring school progress (Robinson, Lanzi, Weinberg, Ramey, & Ramey, 2002), reading to the child, and parental involvement in school (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008) have been linked to early achievement and offer some insight as to how SES, through parental actions, specifically affects children's achievement. The talent development literature suggests that early parental teaching, enriched home environments, a focus on providing cultural enrichment (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, & Guerin, 1994), support for extra lessons, monitoring of practice, modeling persistence, and encouragement of risk-taking are other ways in which families promote the development of skills and attitudes associated with high achievement (Bloom, 1985; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008). It is clear from this literature that lack of financial resources and a necessary preoccupation with day-to-day matters would preclude many low-income parents from being able to do the things that more advantaged families can easily do to support their talented children. However, it also is clear that even parents with very limited resources can, by their messages to children and actions in the home, support their children's achievement. Sampson (2002) found that low-income families of the average and high-achieving children stressed the importance of education and structured their family life around schoolwork and school activities. Parents encouraged participation in extracurricular activities, assuming responsibility at home, and provided a quiet, orderly environment conducive to study. They communicated to students that they alone were in control of their destinies and provided a hopeful and positive view of the future. In contrast, families of low-achieving children communicated different beliefs and values and/or verbally endorsed similar values to families of average and high-achieving children but did not follow through with supportive actions (Sampson, 2002).

The family typically serves as a filter for children, interpreting events and circumstances from the outside world, and in the process creates strong messages about how the world works and what to expect from it, thereby affecting children's attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions. The interpretations that parents or other adults put on difficult circumstances such as racism or poverty will have an effect on whether a child will view education and talent development as the key to success or the means of breaking a cycle of poverty, which can impact beliefs about self-efficacy and one's ability to accomplish future goals (see Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008).

Communities

Communities can provide many additional resources to assist in the talent development of gifted children including psychological services, work and apprenticeship opportunities, and cultural institutions that offer lessons, recreation, and the like. Urban settings are typically resource-rich communities. However, it is not atypical that poor urban children live in blighted neighborhoods completely unaware of the opportunities available only blocks away. The parents of advantaged children regularly take their children to museums, libraries, concerts, ballets, restaurants, and events that enlarge their world-view; expose them to adults in various occupations; increase their cultural knowledge; and help them acquire tacit knowledge about education, careers, and different life paths. Research has shown that poor children lose as much as 3 months of learning over the summer months while more advantaged children make gains due to the enrichment their families provide at home and through community resources (National Summer Learning Association, 2010; see http://www.summerlearning.org). Urban students often lack opportunities to acquire this knowledge, which puts them at a disadvantage when interacting and competing with more advantaged peers and makes them feel different and less capable. It is critical that programs for poor minority students specifically work to level the playing field with respect to exposure to culture and cultural institutions, through field trips and collaborations with cultural institutions, such as museums, to provide gifted programming.

Lessons From Experience

We have been involved in a number of projects that serve low-income, gifted urban students over the last 25 years, but we would like to focus on two current ones: Project Excite and Project LIVE. Both of these programs are "preparatory" types designed to prepare talented minority students to enter existing programs for advanced learners within their school districts.

Project Excite, in its 10th year of operation, identifies students with talent in mathematics in third grade via parent nomination, traditional achievement tests, and a nonverbal ability measure, and involves them in more than 400 hours of science and math enrichment classes after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer for a 6-year period, until students enter high school. Some of the educational classes students take are designed just for Excite students while others integrate Excite students into existing classes through the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University, which draw gifted students nationally. Other components of the

project include parent support and education, tutoring, cultural enrichment, systematic exposure to wider groups of intellectual peers, and psychological services for students who need them.

Project Excite students are recruited from seven schools in a school district where 50% of the students are minority but only 5% to 10% of students in the most advanced math/science track are minority. Project Excite has increased the access of low-income minority students to advanced classes. Across the four cohorts of students who have entered high school, 70% of these students placed in geometry or higher in mathematics as freshman, having completed at least Algebra I by grade 8. For two of the four cohorts, these percentages were 92% and 89%. One high school sophomore is taking AP BC Calculus and one high school freshman has been admitted to the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. In science, we found that 53% to 67% of students in a given cohort were placed into honors-level courses as freshmen. Interviews with Excite students and their parents revealed that students enjoyed the activities, liked "getting ahead" via the accelerated coursework, made attendance at Excite activities a priority, expressed increased confidence for future challenging academic work, and raised parents' expectations, which resulted in parents taking a greater interest in their student's school work. It also is true that achievement of Project Excite students has been more variable than expected during the years of the project, often alternating between quarters of A or B grades and quarters of C grades, particularly once students graduate from the program and enter high school (see Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2004).

Project LIVE starts with students who have completed grade 6 and provides more than 300 hours of supplemental enrichment in language arts after school, on Saturdays, and in the summer until grade 8. Students are identified via teacher recommendation, a lengthy application that includes student essays and parent statements, and scores on state tests and district curriculum assessments. Students had to be at least average readers with potential to achieve at higher levels. Project LIVE students are a diverse group; the majority of students are minority with an average family income of $38,000 in a community where the average income is $75,000. Program components include parent education, cultural enrichment, test preparation, and exposure to other gifted peers. Beyond the goal of preparing students to enter honors English as freshmen, the LIVE program sought to raise students' expectations regarding grades and coursework, increase the level and quantity of extracurricular reading, increase students' self-confidence regarding challenging work, and level the playing field in terms of students' knowledge and exposure to cultural institutions. After the program, achievement results indicated that LIVE students' EXPLORE scores at the middle of eighth grade were significantly higher than those of eighth graders nationally; were better than those of students districtwide (16.8 composite for district versus 18.4 for LIVE); and increased an average of 3.26 points compared to .2 points for the district over the same 3-year period. Regarding high school placements, of the 37 students who completed all 3 years of the program (representing 79% of students who began in Year 1), 70% were placed in honors English as freshmen and many others were placed in a mixed honors class. Surveys of parents and students showed that parental expectations about grades, along with encouragement of reading and monitoring of homework, increased.

How Did These Programs Respond to the Needs of Urban Gifted Students?

These programs responded to the needs of urban gifted children in several key ways:

- Both programs were preparatory in nature, built around the needs of the specific populations to be served, and designed to intensely build the skills of students so that they could enter and be successful in traditional advanced coursework available in their schools. Yet, the programs were crafted to not just build up content knowledge and skills but to engender excitement and motivation for learning through activities that were hands-on, discovery-based, problem-oriented, and creativity-generating. They moved from enrichment activities initially to accelerative experiences eventually.
- Both programs identified children relatively young and provided multiple program options for a period of 3 to 6 years. Through a long-term commitment, trust was built with teachers, school administrators, and parents who came to rely on program administrators for all kinds of help once they were convinced they were there to stay.
- Both programs were primarily out-of-school programs, which were less stigmatizing for students and did not create tensions for students with peers within their home schools regarding high achievement, yet gave them additional peer support.
- Both programs sought to forge close connections with parents and to assist them in understanding and

responding to the needs of their talented child.

- Both programs had cultural enrichment as a component and took students to concerts, plays, museums, arboretums, and universities, and emphasized to parents how to provide enrichment to their children through existing cultural institutions.
- Both programs initially had students participate in educational classes only with other project participants, but eventually moved students into broader settings (i.e., the Center for Talent Development programs, where they interacted with gifted students from around the nation). This did much to bolster students' confidence that they could compete successfully in classes with more advantaged and nonminority peers.
- Both programs created multiple support structures for students, aimed at enhancing peer support for high achievement; building up skills and content knowledge in key subject areas; enabling children to acquire tacit knowledge about schooling; providing exposure to cultural institutions; and responding to unique and individual needs of students and families.

Final Thoughts

Successful programs for poor or minority urban gifted children must be multifaceted and flexible. In a field that stresses how individual gifted children are, we tend to construct programs aimed at groups and at the "typical" low-income minority child. But, there is no typical child, as the circumstances that lead to poverty are many and varied. Some families are low-income because, although educated, they are immigrants to the U.S. They cannot work in their chosen professions and must work at low-level jobs. In contrast, some families are poor because parents are not well-educated, work at minimum wage jobs because that is all they are prepared for, do not have experience with higher levels of education, and may not have high expectations for their child nor understand what is involved in developing their child's talent. Every family in poverty has strengths and weaknesses, features that support the talent development of their child and features that work against it. Strengths of even the poorest and most marginalized families can include the unconditional love and support of family members for a child or the incredible resilience and psychological strength of a child. Interventions need to recognize, affirm, acknowledge, and take advantage of strengths, and identify, understand, and compensate for weaknesses in schools, families, and communities. A more productive approach to assisting talented children of poverty is one that constructs a support plan for each child based on a profile of the strengths and weaknesses of the child's environment. Effective programs build support within the family, the school, and the community (see Olszewski-Kubilius, Grant, & Seibert, 1994) and are tailored to the needs of individual children and families. GCT

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