Identifying Gifted, Talented, or High Ability Students from Low-Income Families

Scott Peters, Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

Marcia Gentry, Ph.D.

Purdue Unviersity

The topic of underrepresented students, typically those from African American, Native American, Hispanic, and low-income families, has gained attention in past years with it going as far as being the headline topic at a recent National Association for Gifted Children Conference. However, much of the work in this area has focused on underrepresentation of youth from racial or ethnic groups, with less emphasis on students who are underrepresented because of their low socio-economic status.

Identification

Despite advances in psychological assessment, family income remains one of the highest correlates with academic achievement (Rogers, 1996; Valencia & Suzuki, 2001). Even though factors other than income are possibly involved in this association (e.g., better access to high quality schools), coming from a low-income family remains a disadvantage with regard to school success (Valencia & Suzuki, 2001). Students from low-income families also tend to be underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented (Stambaugh, 2007; Swanson, 2006). In the 2003 – 2004 school year, more than 40% of all students in American schools were eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program (NCES, n.d.) and yet only 28% of students achieving in the top quartile in first grade were from low-income families (Wyner, Bridgeland, Diiulio, 2007). The free and reduced lunch program provides school lunches to those students whose families come from the lowest two income brackets and has consistently been used as a

gauge for economic standing and has even been criticized as being too exclusive, thereby leaving out a number of students from low-income families even when they suffer from many of the same problems as students who qualify (Viadero, 2006).

In the summary of findings from the National Leadership Conference on Low-Income Promising Learners, Stambaugh (2007) outlined several practices that could aid in the identification of students from low-income families for gifted and talented programs. These included beginning identification as early as kindergarten, followed with ongoing identification to locate students from low-income families who demonstrate gifted and talented behaviors in later grades in school. The author also suggested using teacher behavior checklists that have been shown to yield reliable and valid data on giftedness and talent specifically for students from low-income families. Stambaugh also emphasized the importance of using more specific normative groups in assessment than have traditionally been used. Teacher rating scales, as with any other measure, should be used in conjunction with multiple assessments in order to provide a comprehensive view of a student. Finally, participants in the conference identified professional development and teacher training as important to ensure that educators know what behaviors to look for in students from low-income families who might benefit from programs for gifted and talented students.

Luckily, what is needed to better identify and program for gifted and talented students from low-income families is that same as what is needed for any underrepresented students. The use of an improper comparison group, or conversely the use of published test norms, has been suggested as one major reason that traditional standardized assessment tools fail to locate proportional numbers of certain groups (Lohman, 2006). Traditionally, all students within a given school are given the same test and their results are compared with published test norms. In

doing so administrators base their school's placement decisions on national or even international averages. Although certainly such a comparison is useful for gauging overall performance, it is not as useful in making placement decisions within the smaller context of a single school. Lohman (2006) gave the example of the 5% of American schools whose average achievement test score is around 95% when compared to the rest of the nation. In this setting, national norms do very little in telling an educator which students are in need of special services at an individual school. However, when students in schools are compared to each other, educators are better suited to make decisions about instructional placement. In this case, the gifted and talented classes might involve only students in the top .5% when compared to national norms, but in the top 25% of the local school population. Lohman argued that the more specific the normative comparison group, the better. This is true for groupings such as income, race / ethnicity, as well as school or grade-level groups. Such a practice allows educators to see which students are achieving or have the potential to achieve given similar background and circumstances.

This idea of a school or district-specific comparison group should not stop at the local context. Instead, students should be compared to as similar students as possible. In the low-income context this means that students from low-income families should be compared academically to similar students. This allows the educator to see how well the student is performing relative to others who have had similar experiences and come from a similar background. Instead, typically students from low-income families have their test scores or teacher ratings compared with those from students from high-income families. Such a practice will never result in proportional representation by low-income students because the group to which they are compared has had years of enriched experiences.

A second example may help illustrate this issue. Take, for example, the Mark Twain story of the *Prince and the Pauper* where twins are born but separated at birth. One was raised in wealth while the other in extreme poverty. Because of the extreme differences in their upbringing, it is highly unlikely that the child raised in poverty will perform at the same level as his or her sibling, despite identical parentage. If, instead, the child raised in poverty was compared to other children raised in poverty, educators would be able to see how well each student performs or achieves given the same background, opportunities, or income status. Such a practice will yield a more accurate view of actual ability that is not as obstructed by income or past experiences.

The *HOPE Scale*

A potential solution to the problems inherent in identifying traditionally underrepresented students for gifted and talented programs was offered in the *HOPE Teacher Rating Scale* (Peters & Gentry, 2009). This instrument, developed by researchers at Purdue University, was specifically designed for such a purpose and has undergone extensive evaluation using data from nearly 8000 K-5 students in Indiana and Illinois. This instrument was developed and evaluated to ensure that items did not function differently for members of traditionally underrepresented populations. Additionally, scores on the *HOPE Scale* are meant to be compares to as similar a peer group as possible. For example, African American students who are from low-income families should be compared to other students with similar backgrounds. This helps to prevent issues such as race / ethnicity and income from influencing placement decisions to as great a degree as is possible. To date, no other teacher rating instrument has been developed and evaluated specifically for locating proportional numbers of high-ability students from underrepresented populations.

Programming

Even when appropriate comparison norms are used to identify children from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, problems can still occur at the programming level. The two students described above will be at different achievement levels when compared to national norms or even state / provincial standards. Anytime a gifted and talented program is diversified, meaning made to appear proportional to the actual population, the range of ability levels represented will increase. Because of this, giftedness and talent cannot be seen as a dichotomous, categorical state of being where you either are or are not gifted. Instead, giftedness and talent must be viewed on a continuum and services need to be provided for students at different places on the continuum. Such a continuum was suggested by Gentry (n.d.) and is presented in Table 1. This type of continuum is necessary across grade-levels as well as across ability levels within individual grades to address identified talents and develop talents among students with potential. If the student from poverty described above is successfully identified based on specific peer-group comparisons, but the program in which he or she is placed is still based on high-income student standards, the students from poverty will at best be placed in a program that is inappropriate for his or her needs and at worst will lead to failure.

The need for services to match the students' needs is nothing new. This concept of differentiated curriculum should also apply to gifted and talented programming. Not only should such programs be flexible from year to year with different groups of students, but they should also be flexible with regard to providing multiple levels of service. If the goal of an educational program is to help students grow and learn, then the program must start at the level where students currently are working, and then challenge them in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). When students enter a program that is beyond their current achievement level,

they can become frustrated and may dropout of the program, unless they receive support to help them succeed with the difficult material. Such a situation was documented in Project HOPE where low-income students attended a university-based enrichment program (Miller, Gentry, Peters, Gates, & Mann, 2009). In this instance, high-ability students from low-income families were provided with enrichment opportunities as well as additional support in order to help them achieve at a level commensurate with their potential. In this setting, high-potential students from low-income families were able to perform in a similar fashion to all other students.

Unfortunately for those students from low-income families, much of this issue of identification policies is a philosophical debate. Traditional standardized testing practices typically involve the same comparison group being used for all students with certain score cutoffs being required as criteria for entrance into gifted and talented programs, regardless of student background. At the same time, according to the *Achievement Trap* report (Wyner et al., 2007), gifted and talented students from low-income families are falling farther and farther behind, possibly in part because they are unable to gain access to appropriate programming. If the goal is in fact to help all students achieve at a level commensurate with their ability, then identification procedures and programming need to be designed specifically to find all types of students and challenge them with appropriate and enriched educational programming.

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Table 1. *A Continuum of High-Ability, Gifted Education, and Talent Development Services* (Gentry, n.d.)

Elementary School	Middle School	High School
General Classroom Enrichment, Talents Unlimited, Junior Great Books	General Classroom Enrichment	General Classroom Enrichment
Discovery, Inquiry, Problem Based Learning	Discovery, Inquiry, Problem Based Learning	Discovery, Inquiry, Problem Based Learning
Enrichment Clusters	Academies of Inquiry	Academies of Inquiry
Differentiation	Differentiation	Differentiation
Curriculum Compacting	Curriculum Compacting	Curriculum Compacting
Individual and Small Group Counseling	Individual and Small Group Counseling	Individual and Small Group Counseling
Social, Emotional, Physical Health	Social, Emotional, Physical Health	Social, Emotional, Physical Health
Independent Study in Interest Area	Independent Study in Interest Area	Independent Study in Interest Area and Self-Designed Courses
Product/Service in Interest Area	Product/Service in Interest Area	Product/Service in Interest Area
Career Awareness	Career Counseling	Career and Educational Counseling
Within-Class Cluster Grouping	Small Group Flexible Grouping and Differentiation, Achievement Grouping	Advanced Placement Courses
Total School Cluster Grouping		
Between Class Grouping by Skill Level	Advanced options in leadership, music, visual and performing arts	Advanced options in leadership, music, visual and performing arts
Non-Graded Cluster Grouping	Within and Across Grade Level Advanced/Honors Classes	Honors Courses
Within and Across Grade Pull-out by targeted ability, subject and interest areas	Resource room send-out to facilitate advanced, student-based study	International Baccalaureate
Self Contained Classes, (single or multigrade)	Self Contained Classes, (single or multigrade)	Advanced Academies
Magnet Schools	Magnet Schools	Magnet Schools, Special Schools
Integrated Technology	Integrated Technology	Integrated Technology, Career and Technical Education Courses
Multicultural/Foreign Language Study	Multicultural/Foreign Language	Multicultural/Foreign Language
Individual Options: Internships, Apprenticeships, Mentorships, IEP, Dual Exceptionalities	Individual Options: Internships, Apprenticeships, Mentorships, IEP, Dual Exceptionalities	Individual Options: Internships, Apprenticeships, Mentorships, IEP, Dual Exceptionalities
Acceleration Options: Early admission, grade skipping, subject acceleration, dual enrollment in middle school classes	Acceleration Options: Grade skipping, subject acceleration, telescoping, dual enrollment in high school classes	Acceleration Options: Subject acceleration, telescoping, dual enrollment in high school classes, dual enrollment in college classes, early admission to college
Special Talent Programs: Young Writers, Saturday and Summer Programs, Future Problem Solving, Math Olympiad, Science Olympiad, Math Leagues, Science Fairs, Talent Searches, Odyssey of the Mind, Destination Imagination, Invention Convention, etc.	Special Talent Programs: Young Writers, Saturday and Summer Programs, Future Problem Solving, Math Olympiad, Science Olympiad, Math Leagues, Science Fairs, Talent Searches, Odyssey of the Mind, Destination Imagination, Invention Convention, etc.	Special Talent Programs: Young Writers, Saturday and Summer Programs, Future Problem Solving, Math Olympiad, Science Olympiad, Math Leagues, Science Fairs, Talent Searches, Odyssey of the Mind, Destination Imagination, Invention Convention, Youth in Government, Close up, Governors' Schools and Academies, etc.