

# What's the Recognizing Bias Challenge?

With passage of the *Equal Education Opportunity Act* (1974), Congress effectively declared that human academic potential exists within all groups of people. Yet, even decades later, disproportionately few English Language Learners are included in gifted/talented educational programs. This section describes some of the factors that may be involved in these inequities for our English Language Learners.

## Reliance on Standardized Tests

Intelligence and academic achievement test scores are most often used to recognize and identify, as well as develop and evaluate, gifted/talented students' potential. Many researchers urge caution, however. Heavy reliance on standardized tests results in diverse groups of students being unequally represented, with greater concentrations in special education classes and fewer concentrations in gifted/talented classrooms.

This caution also applies when using standardized *non-verbal* intelligence tests. All tests assume a certain kind of language socialization, and students who lack this socialization are, by definition, disadvantaged. Even when the test is nonverbal, test administrators must use language to tell the students what they are to do. Selecting tests that reduce cultural and linguistic bias is not an easy task, and it's questionable whether any test is truly "culture free."

## Cultural Context

When identifying gifted/talented students who are culturally diverse, or have limited English proficiency, we must do so within the context of their cultural background. We need to understand, for example, that behaviors signaling giftedness in one culture may signal disrespect in another. To a teacher, a student who provides information the teacher doesn't know may be viewed as precocious.

But, when viewed by the student's parents, that same behavior may well be considered disrespectful.

Of course, the opposite is also true. Behaviors that a teacher might *devalue* as signs of conformity such as not correcting an adult who has given inaccurate information may be highly *valued* by the student's parents as serving the collective good of the family.

## National and State Data by Ethnicity

Data provided by the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) shows that, while 7.9 percent of all African American, 6.7 percent of all Hispanic, and 2.1 percent of all Heritage American students surveyed were enrolled in gifted/talented programs, a disproportionately high 17.5 percent of all Asian American students and 9 percent of all white students were enrolled.

The 2006-2007 Iowa Public School data of gifted students vs. total K-12 enrollment shows 4.6 percent African American, 3.3 percent Hispanic, 3.25 percent American Indian students were identified for gifted programming. Also, 12.4 percent Asian American and 9 percent white students were identified for gifted programming in Iowa public schools.

## Language Prejudice

Even differences in English Language Learner dialects have been found to influence initial administrator and teacher judgments. Such judgments are critically important because they can influence how administrators and teachers view an English Language Learner's potential giftedness.

If an educator stereotypes a certain culture as not valuing education, he or she is not as likely to view a student from that culture as bright. This attitude also may lead to fears that by admitting a student from that culture into the gifted/talented program, its quality will be watered-down.

Professional development that raises cultural awareness may help refute these stereotypes and result in more equitable representation in gifted/talented programs by students of all cultures.

When we do accept cultural differences, we still may not recognize or understand cultural behaviors that are different from our own. We may not even recognize giftedness if it is expressed in ways other than those we are accustomed to seeing. When parents, administrators, and teachers are able to recognize how the diverse expressions of giftedness and talent are impacted by cultural and linguistic factors, we will be able to recognize the indicators of potential.

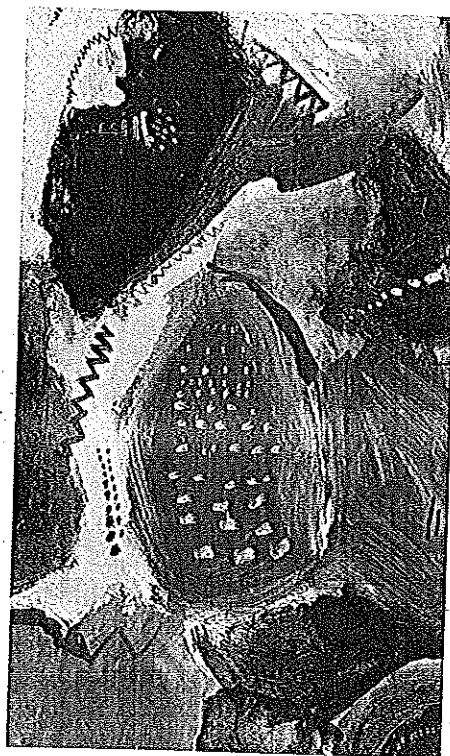
When intelligence, achievement, and ability test scores are used as the criteria for admission to gifted/talented programs, African American, Hispanic, and Native American children are disproportionately underrepresented. In some cultures, the use of such test scores signals a lack of respect for the families' heritages and the ways in which giftedness may be expressed within them.

Steps to address these biases include conscious and intentionally directed K-12 multicultural professional development, the choice of culturally appropriate assessments, and the analysis and use of all data.

## Cultural Bias

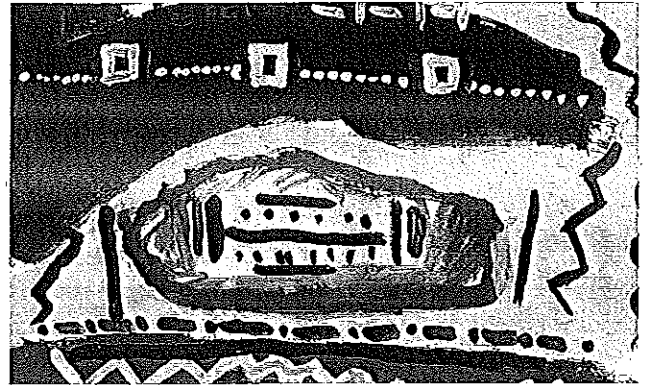
Classroom teachers or other school personnel frequently refer students for gifted identification and programming. A particular challenge for educators who are responsible for teaching gifted/talented students who do not speak fluent English, can be the lack of training in identifying their gifted and talented abilities.

Research findings support that the limited inclusion of English Language Learners in gifted/talented programs is sometimes based on discriminatory attitudes. Although we may think we're aware of our own biases, we may have stereotypes and prejudices that devalue other cultures.



## Caught Between Two Languages

For English Language Learners, learning and living in two languages and cultures can be especially challenging. Many parents of ELLs try to transmit their cultural values by having their children learn and speak their heritage language at home. At the same time, English Language Learners may be pressured to accommodate the values of the school culture by being encouraged to speak only English. This challenge places many English Language Learners in the position of having to simultaneously learn the values inherent in two separate and distinct language cultures.



## An Inequitable Standard

For many people, the concept of “giftedness” equates to high academic achievement. For English Language Learners who are not yet fluent in English, this is an inequitable standard. It excludes English Language Learners, and minority children who do not do well on academic assessments, but who have elevated general abilities as measured by nonverbal ability assessments.

Instruments that can detect giftedness and talent in English Language Learners are sorely lacking, and inadequate assessment procedures continue to contribute to the under representation of English Language Learners in gifted/talented programs. Recommendations for assessment include the need for assessment measures that do not rely on language and to gather student information from multiple sources.

Iowa Administrative Code, Chapter 12, states that gifted and talented programming include multiple selection criteria for identifying gifted and talented students from the total student population. Standardized assessments are not required for identification in Iowa schools.

While some students show their gifts/talents in the classroom, others may only show the “potential for responding positively” to gifted and talented programming not enough evidence for program referral.

## What’s the Solution?

It’s clear that a variety of factors are responsible for the inequitable identification of English Language Learners for gifted/talented programs. So now that we know some of the challenges, what can we do about them? How can we ensure fairness in screening all students so that we can provide them with services tailored for their particular combination of talent and intelligence? Section 3 attempts to answer these question.

