

## Teacher Perspectives Regarding Gifted Diverse Students

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### Recommended Citation

Szymanski, Toni and Shaff, Thomas (2013) "Teacher Perspectives Regarding Gifted Diverse Students," *Gifted Children*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/giftedchildren/vol6/iss1/1>

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Teachers are often called upon to recommend children for a variety of services and programming in schools (McBee, 2010, 2006; Salvia, Yseedyke, & Bolt, 2010). Many factors influence the quality and outcome of this process. Students who require services beyond the general education classroom, whether they are English Language classes, special education resources, accommodations for behavioral disorders, or gifted programming, often depend on the classroom teachers' ability to recognize the student's learning needs. Teachers' perceptions of students' needs are influenced by the individual experiences of both the students and teachers. Differences in language and culture may cloud the perceptions and understanding of student behavior (Berman, Schultz, & Weber, 2010; Ford, 2012; McBee, 2010). Teachers need education, training, and support to develop the skills to make these recommendations. Exploring the multiple perspectives teachers bring to this task helps to understand their expectations regarding who should be included in special programming.

Historically, students of color or those who are not native English speakers have been seriously underrepresented in gifted programs (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, Holloway, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harris, Brown, Ford, & Richardson, 2004; Loveless, 2009; Patton, 1998; Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2009; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). In a recent review Ford (2012) noted that Hispanic students are underrepresented in gifted programs nationally by 40% and argued that teachers lack diversity and cultural competence and hold low expectations for these students. Low levels of training and limited understanding of the needs of gifted students from diverse backgrounds results in fewer diverse students being referred by teachers for gifted and talented programs (Moon & Brighton, 2008; Pierce, Adams, Neumeister, Cassady, Dixon, & Cross, 2007). Given the level of underrepresentation of non-white students in gifted programs and estimates of the increasing diversity of the student body nationally, increasing teacher understanding is crucial (Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008; Esquierdo & Arreguin-Anderson, 2012).

In addition to the well documented achievement gap between Caucasian and racially diverse students (Barton & Coley, 2010), researchers have recently noted that the achievement gap between high achieving students is larger than that between average or low achieving students (Loveless, 2009; Plucker et al., 2010). National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data show that Hispanic students are identified to receive gifted services at approximately 60% of the expected rate given their proportion in the school age population (NCES, 2011). This is important, as diverse students with the potential to excel in academics deserve the opportunity to develop their potential and bring unique perspectives to classes that are dominated by Caucasian students.

It is estimated that by between 2000 and 2050, the Hispanic student population will double, from 12.5% to 24.4%, and in some districts will result in

White, non-Hispanic students becoming the minority group (Esquierdo & Arreguin-Anderson, 2012; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1989). Currently, pre-service teachers often receive little training to prepare them for cognitive diversity in the classroom (Berman, Schultz, & Weber, 2012) For example, most teaching programs tend to require one course on exceptional students, which may focus primarily on students with learning and behavioral disabilities (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2010). As a result, many teachers enter classrooms with only a superficial understanding of the characteristics and needs of gifted learners. The combination of limited training in working with culturally diverse students and little to no training in identifying and working with gifted students may negatively influence teachers role in recommending service for gifted Hispanic students. Moon and Brighton (2008) indicate the consequences of a teachers' understanding of giftedness on the development of gifted students' talents.

In this way, *whether* a primary grade student receives support to develop his or her talents, and *how* his or her talents are developed will depend in large measure on how that student's teacher conceptualizes giftedness in young children, including those from diverse backgrounds (p. 449).

Further, Moon and Brighton (2008) found that primary grade teachers held outdated beliefs regarding giftedness—beliefs that significantly influence the educational experience of gifted students such as “learns quickly and easily...has a large amount of general information” (p. 461). These teachers were also less likely to identify a gifted student who “has a lot of energy, may have difficulty remaining in seat..gives unexpected, sometimes ‘smart-aleck’ answers” (p.462).

As professionals, teachers strive to help students develop their potential, and although they are important determinants for identifying students who would benefit from advanced programming, there seems to be a mismatch between teacher intentions and teacher actions on behalf of diverse students. It is important to examine teachers' perspectives on issues related to the awareness and identification of giftedness in culturally and racially diverse students.

In this qualitative study, we investigated teachers' perceptions of their training for teaching in multicultural settings and for working with gifted Hispanic children. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of teacher perspectives regarding identifying and accommodating gifted Hispanic students in their classrooms. The teachers selected for this study varied in the amount of training and experience they reported in working with diverse, gifted learners. Their perceptions of their training and the resulting interactions with these students illuminate the relationship between training and effective teaching.

## **Background**

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), also known as Public Law 110-315, includes language that focuses specifically on teaching skills required for serving students with unique learning needs. The law states:

The term ‘teaching skills’ means skills that enable a teacher to employ strategies grounded in the disciplines of teaching and learning that focus on the identification of students’ specific learning needs, particularly students with disabilities, students who are limited English proficient, students who are gifted and talented, and students with low literacy levels, and the tailoring of academic instruction to such needs. (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008)

This law emphasizes the skills that teachers are required to possess (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). However, both current and pre-service teachers typically receive little training in the learning needs of gifted students, especially in how to tailor academic instruction to meet such needs (Pierce, Adams, Neumeister, Cassady, Dixon & Cross, 2007). This lack of training may prevent teachers from identifying students’ needs and properly modifying curriculum and instruction to enhance their learning. A lack of cultural awareness also contributes to under identification and service for children of color (Ford, Trotman, & Frazier, 2001). Thus, pre-service training programs and professional development for current teachers regarding the needs of exceptional students is recommended to support the intent of the law.

The effect of training on teacher perceptions and expectations of students may influence classroom interactions (Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Moon & Brighton, 2008; Rizza & Morrison, 2003). Rizza and Morrison (2003) found that teachers with more training were able to identify characteristics of gifted students better than those without training. Geake and Gross (2008) found that specific professional development for teachers on the social and academic characteristics of gifted students had a significant effect on teachers’ attitudes regarding gifted students. The authors concluded that answers to survey questions by teachers without training suggested a negative attitude towards gifted students and a view of high intelligence as a threat to social order (Geake & Gross, 2008).

Pierce et al. (2007) noted that in the absence of training, teachers may rely on their own conceptions of the manifestations of giftedness and thus may limit their identification of students to those who have these characteristics. Moon and Brighton (2008) found that “the majority of respondents seemed unable to consider as gifted students who deviate from textbook indicators of giftedness.

These pervasive beliefs seem to most significantly disadvantage students from poverty and those students whose first language is not English” (p. 473). Thus, teachers who rely on their own understandings of giftedness may be at a disadvantage when interacting with students who do not conform to the teachers’ expectations. Teachers with naïve beliefs about giftedness may fail to identify students using accepted criteria and instead identify students who conform to their expectations (Moon & Brighton, 2008).

Teacher referrals are often the first step in the process of identifying participants for programs for gifted students (Elhoweris, et al., 2005; Ford & Harmon, 2001; McBee, 2010; McBee, 2006). A nationwide study of policies for identifying gifted students noted that in 40 of 50 states in the U.S., teacher recommendations are the most frequently cited source for screening students for gifted programming (Coleman & Gallagher, 1992). As such, the teacher’s attitudes and understanding of culturally diverse learners may play a large role in the selection of these students for special programs.

Recent research has shown conflicting results regarding teachers’ ability to recognize gifted students. (Hodge & Kemp, 2008; Pfeiffer & Petscher, 2008; Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2003; Renzulli, Siegle, Reis, Gavin & Sytsma Reed, 2009) Studies conducted in the US found that teachers are reliable observers of student behavior when they have good guides they are trained to use and a reasonable length of time to observe typical classroom behavior (Pfeiffer & Petscher, 2008; Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2003; Renzulli, et al., 2009). However, Hodge and Kemp (2006) found that Australian teachers were only successful in identifying gifted students 57% of the time.

One area found to be lacking in pre-service teacher preparation programs is the identification and understanding of gifted learners. This lack of training can impact teachers’ perceptions of gifted students and their recognition of characteristic behaviors that would help them identify gifted students. Without formal education on the characteristics and needs of gifted learners, teachers may rely on personal beliefs about these students that may not be valid (Berman, Schultz, & Weber, 2012).

Teachers who fail to understand the cultural behaviors and values of their students may indirectly contribute to low student achievement (Ford, et al., 2001). Those who lack sufficient training in understanding the diverse students in their classrooms commonly view students in terms of cultural deficit models and stereotypes (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford et al., 2001; Townsend, 2002). “Teacher perceptions of minority students, which are frequently stereotyped, influence instructional practices” (Townsend, 2002, p. 730). This influence may negatively affect the academic experience of racially diverse students, students of low socioeconomic status, and English language learners (ELLs).

Ford and colleagues reported that pre-service teachers do not receive adequate training in multiculturalism and the understanding of diverse students (Ford & Harmon, 2001; Ford, Howard, Harris, & Tyson, 2000; Ford et al., 2001). Given that the majority of elementary school teachers are White, middle-class females, the racial/cultural differences between students and teachers may be responsible for inadequate understanding regarding communication, expectations, or performance. The single course on multiculturalism taken by many pre-service teachers may provide only a brief introduction to the diverse cultures represented in their classrooms (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005). Similar to the experience of teachers educating gifted students without proper training, teachers without adequate training in understanding culturally diverse learners must often rely on personal experience or anecdotal evidence when working with students of different cultures.

In an investigation of multicultural competencies of teachers of gifted students, Ford et al. (2001) found that while gifted education textbooks provided characteristics and competencies that were beneficial for teachers to work successfully with gifted students, the additional skill set that was required to be effective with multicultural students was lacking. These multicultural skills and understandings are rarely specifically addressed in educational texts for educating gifted children (Ford et al., 2001). Likewise, multicultural education courses that focus on developing competencies for working with culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students rarely mention the needs of gifted students. Thus the two areas of knowledge, namely teaching gifted students and teaching diverse students, are likely to remain isolated, which may serve to perpetuate the underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted programs because teachers have not received integrated training.

Multicultural teacher education programs typically fall into two categories. Some describe an individual's orientation to diverse learners, while others recognize multicultural education as a sociopolitical tool that may be used to reverse issues of power, privilege, and inequity (Gorski, 2009). Of the syllabi that Gorski examined, 71% were found to frame pre-service teacher multicultural education in ways that did not align with a multicultural education theoretical framework. A study by Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2005) found that even though pre-service teachers received training in multicultural education and reported feeling more positive about teaching multicultural students, they still felt apprehensive and ill-equipped to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students. Gorski's analysis found that only 29% of the multicultural teacher education courses focused on developing the required skills for working with diverse students.

Students' perceptions of teacher relations and school climate have also been shown to affect the motivation and self-concept of racially diverse students

(Ford et al., 2008; Milner & Ford, 2007). Stereotype threat is defined as “the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies.” (Steele, 1997, p. 614), and has been shown to extend beyond testing conditions to influence classroom interactions (Steele, 1997). Stereotype threat has also been shown to influence a child’s ability to learn as a function of teacher expectations (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). More telling is evidence that non-white children are aware of being stigmatized by negative expectations at a much younger age and that such awareness affects their ability to learn (McKown & Weinstein, 2003, 2008).

The situativity of the educational process was re-emphasized by Worrell (2009): “Academic achievement is not merely an individual endeavor; rather, it occurs in a social context and is framed by one’s perceived position in the social structure of the society” (p. 138). While many researchers purport that the best indicator of future achievement is past achievement (Lohman, 2005a), for students from minority groups, the social structure of previous educational conditions may have erected barriers that impede students’ ability to “experience and exercise” their abilities (Lohman, 2005b, p. 119). Educators play an important role in helping to remove structural barriers such as stereotype threat and the impact of teacher expectations. Teachers can provide opportunities for students to develop academic aptitudes if they understand student needs and how to modify curriculum and instruction to meet those needs.

Teachers who hold a cultural deficit model for racially diverse students may not believe that these students are capable of high academic achievement (Ford et al., 2001). Similarly, teachers who do not understand the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of gifted students may not believe that services are necessary to help these students develop their potential. The combination of lack of cultural awareness and lack of training regarding gifted learners for professionals in such an influential role may strongly affect the educational experiences of gifted, racially diverse students.

The research questions explored in this study of one school district with a majority of Hispanic residents and a majority of White teachers are:

1. What are teachers’ perceptions of their training in working with Hispanic gifted learners?
2. How do teachers identify students to participate in a gifted and talented program?
3. How do teachers modify classroom instruction to meet the needs of gifted and talented students?
4. What barriers do teachers perceive to have an effect on Hispanic gifted students’ participation in a gifted and talented program?

## **Method**

Qualitative methods were chosen to focus on a small group of teachers to understand their motives, behavior, and frustrations in working with diverse, gifted students. A qualitative design was the best method for in-depth investigations regarding personal perspectives and meaning in a specific context and thus was used to answer the research questions. The theoretical framework used in this study was constructivism in which people are seen as creating their own reality based on experience in an education research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). We followed the consensual qualitative research (CQR) paradigm for this study (Ponterotto, 2005). CQR uses medium-length, semi-structured interviews in which the researchers do not interact with the participants except during the interviews. CQR is predicated on core ideas being established in advance; in that regard, a thorough literature review led to the creation of the interview questions.

We expected teachers to have limited training in working with gifted students and as a result to have stereotypical ideas regarding characteristics of gifted learners. We were unsure of the role of the TAG coordinator and thus chose to interview teachers who had not worked with the coordinator (second-grade teachers) as well as those who had worked more closely with her (third-grade teachers) to explore any differences. We also interviewed the TAG coordinator based on her essential role of providing professional development for the teachers as well as providing the services for those students identified as gifted. We also expected the teachers to have received significant training on working with English Language Learners (ELLs) but were unsure how that training would relate, if at all, to their understanding of the needs of diverse, gifted learners.

Multiple perspectives are useful to understand the situation teachers face when they must identify students from traditionally underrepresented groups. A constructivist perspective contextualizes the cultural experiences of teachers working with diverse learners. As advocates for gifted children, the authors are interested in understanding perspectives of professionals who work closely with gifted students to improve the participation of traditionally unrepresented groups in gifted education.

### **Context**

The study took place in a small, rural, mid-western U.S. town. Of the approximately 900 K-12 students in the school district, 64.5% were Hispanic and 65% were eligible for free and reduced student lunch. Additional school demographics are shown in Table 1. Over the past 20 years, this town had seen a large increase in the number of Hispanic families. The school was working to accommodate students for whom English was not the first language and whose parents did not speak English. The school had been put on the “watch list” by the State Department of Education in 2007 as needing improvement due to low standardized test scores.

*Table 1. School District Information*

Number of Students K-12	900
White	30.5%
Hispanic	64.5%
Black	1.2%
Asian / Pacific Islander	1.9%
Other	0.1%
Percentage Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch	65%
Percentage Identified for Gifted Programming	5%
Percentage Identified as English Language Learners	22.71%
Percentage of Graduates	77%

Five percent of the total student population was identified for services through gifted and talented programs. The statewide average participation was 8%, although each local district set its own criteria for program admission. Identification for gifted services in the participating school was based on standardized test scores and teacher observations in third grade. Students who scored in the top 10% on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills were considered for inclusion in gifted programming. Teachers provided input to the extent that they believed that the high scoring students would benefit from inclusion in the gifted program. Additionally, teachers used checklists developed by the TAG coordinator to recommend students who demonstrated classroom performance above that of their peers.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. We were interested in understanding teachers' perceptions regarding diverse, gifted students. Students in the participating school district were typically identified to participate in programs for gifted students in third grade; therefore, it was important to interview third-grade teachers. We were also interested in the means by which teachers understood giftedness and identified gifted students; therefore, we chose second-grade teachers because they had not worked as closely with the Talented and Gifted (TAG) coordinator and, we believed, would rely more on the knowledge that they had received in their college preparation and teaching experience.

As the focus of this study was on teachers who worked with gifted students, the TAG coordinator was an integral part of the study. The TAG teacher bears the responsibility of training teachers on recognizing gifted students and meeting the students' instructional needs inside of the classroom. Her understanding of the characteristics of gifted children and the communication of

these traits to teachers effectively determined the children who were nominated for programming. The TAG teacher was also a crucial informant regarding the behaviors of the other teachers in identifying and working with gifted students.

The six participants in this study were all White, Non-Hispanic Caucasian; two taught second grade, three taught third grade, and one taught gifted and talented (TAG) (see Table 2). The teachers had experience ranging from 2 years to 33 years of teaching, and all of the teachers had been in the school district for their entire careers. The TAG teacher had over 25 years of teaching experience and had been hired by the district two years previously as the TAG coordinator for the district. Prior to her placement as the gifted coordinator, the TAG teacher worked mainly with struggling readers. She took courses at the local University on working with gifted and talented students to increase her understanding. These courses included topics such as differentiating curriculum, identifying culturally diverse students, and developing a gifted and talented program.

*Table 2. Participant Information- Pseudonyms Used*

Name	Grade Taught	Years Teaching Experience
Ms. Phillips	2	16
Ms. Kelly	2	2
Ms. Palmer	3	33
Ms. Robinson	3	32
Ms. James	3	16
Ms. Patrick	TAG	25

### **Document Collection Procedures**

The first author contacted the principal and invited the school to participate in the study. When school approval had been obtained, an informational letter containing a thorough description of the study and the request for teacher participation was mass emailed to the second- and third-grade teachers and the district's TAG teacher. Five of the six teachers that were contacted were able to meet. The teacher that did not participate did not respond to the invitation until the interviews and observations had already been conducted. The participating teachers contacted the first author to arrange dates for observations and interviews. The Institutional Review Board granted approval for the study and the interview protocols that were used. All IRB policies and regulations were followed during the contact and data collection procedures.

### **Individual Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection (see Appendices B and C). The benefit of this approach was that all participants were asked similar questions; however, participants were free to add more information and the

researcher was able to follow up on the responses given (Patton, 1990). Each participant was interviewed for approximately 45 minutes, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. The interviews were conducted at the school where the teachers worked.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit information regarding the research questions. Specifically, general education teacher questions two and three were designed to give information regarding teacher training (Appendix B). General education teacher questions six through eight explicitly asked for information regarding how students were identified for gifted programming in the district, teacher comments on the process, and modifications that teachers make to accommodate high ability learners. Teacher questions one and four were less explicit in their questioning, to prompt more wide ranging responses regarding teachers' personal conceptions of gifted students to discern whether teacher perceptions reflected specific characteristics of gifted students. Interview questions ten and eleven asked teachers to directly identify barriers that they saw for students' identification and participation in gifted programming. Questions five and nine were an indirect attempt to understand possible barriers by identifying differences among gifted students and student engagement. The interview questions used with the TAG coordinator were similar to those for the general education teachers (Appendix C). Additionally, the TAG coordinator information was used to describe teacher behavior with gifted students. Copies of the interview transcripts were sent to the participants to verify that they were correct. No comments or corrections were noted by the participants.

### **Data Analysis Process**

The researchers used constant comparison analysis to analyze the data for this qualitative study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The constant comparison method is applied in a two-step process in which the first is to analyze each teacher's responses and the second is to reanalyze the data across all cases. The analysis begins when the initial data are collected. For each case the investigator identifies categories that are modified as new data are collected. When all of the data have been coded, categories are created across the data sources. The categories are then synthesized to identify general themes. The researchers analyzed the interview transcripts and coded them into categories individually. The codings were compared and initial agreement was 84%. Upon further reflection and discussion, unanimous agreement was reached. The researchers then collaborated to find themes that emerged when the categories were considered.

### **Results**

Three themes emerged from the data: (a) teachers experience differences in training to work with diverse, low income students and with gifted students; (b) teachers use personal beliefs to compensate for their lack of training in identifying

and accommodating gifted learners; and (c) teachers perceive barriers for diverse students participating in gifted programming.

### **Teachers Experience Differences in Training to Work with Diverse and Gifted Students**

**Formal gifted pre-service education.** In response to the prompt, “Tell me about any training and experiences that you have had about working with gifted students,” five of the six participants reported a lack of training for understanding and working with gifted students. Ms. Kelly stated: “You know it is terrible, but I don’t remember anything that I have had, any lectures or training. I don’t think I had any” (Interview 2-2, 11/24/2010, p. 1). Only Ms. Patrick, the TAG coordinator with a master’s degree in special education, had taken a course on working with gifted students. The remaining teachers had received only one or two lectures about gifted students in their pre-service education. Some courses were as many as 20 years ago. Ms. Robinson had read magazine articles on gifted students because she had a child who was identified as gifted.

Ms. Patrick, the TAG coordinator, had learned several ways to meet the needs of gifted learners. In her studies at a major research center, she learned to use local norms to identify diverse, gifted students. “The Center said to take the ELL students and look at their sub-group norms and then take students whose scores wouldn’t be remarkable but were quite a bit above the norm” (Interview TAG, 1/16/2011, p. 4). This procedure influenced Ms. Patrick to create a Talent Development group of gifted learners for whom English was a second language. Prior to receiving training, the school procedure had been to use overall high test scores and teacher recommendations to identify gifted students. Training in identification of gifted students showed Ms. Patrick that ELL students may score lower than other students due to language barriers. Using the scores of the ELL students alone (local norms) and finding those students who scored high within that sub-group allowed Ms. Patrick to identify students who would benefit from programming for gifted students (Lohman, 2005b). Training also helped Ms. Patrick understand that the needs of gifted students could be met by “pulling and pushing.” Ms. Patrick could “pull the students out of class for special group lessons” and “push herself into the classroom by helping the teacher with extension activities or small group instruction” (Interview TAG, 1/16/2011, p. 3) to support the teacher in working with the gifted population. This additional training allowed Ms. Patrick to forge alliances with classroom teachers and begin to work with more students.

The TAG coordinator, Ms. Patrick, conducted annual in-service training in which she provided handouts on characteristics of gifted students and the recommendation forms she created for use in the school. However, she expressed concern because, despite the in-service training, teachers still recommended “teacher pleasers.” She defined “teacher pleasers” as those students who work

quietly, independently, and quickly, which may or may not reflect all of the gifted students in the classroom.

All five classroom teachers expressed the opinion that they lacked sufficient training in working with gifted students and how to properly identify and support them in the classroom. Ms. James summed up her feelings: "I don't think we really do much training for those gifted students. I think it almost tends to be that's Ms. Patrick's (TAG teacher) job to do that" (Interview 3-3, 1/22/2011, p. 5). The training tended to be limited to handouts, according to the teachers. Ms. Kelly expressed her confusion regarding the handouts: "Like last year she (Ms. Patrick) said to us, 'If you feel you do have any gifted students in your classroom, feel free to let me know' and of course then I'm like 'what constitutes a gifted student?' you know?" (Interview 2-2, 11/24/2010, p. 1). The teachers expressed confusion regarding how students were identified "We have a form that you fill out it has like six boxes maybe like checklists. What are their characteristics in reference to this and that. You just kind of plop things down" (Interview 2-1, 11/24/2007, p.2). The teachers expressed confusion regarding the characteristics of gifted students even when provided with behavioral checklists.

**Professional Development Training for teaching Hispanic students is emphasized.** The school has a full-time ELL team that works with teachers to support their understanding of the unique needs of Hispanic students. All five classroom teachers reported that they received significant in-service training and experiences in working with diverse, low income students. However, five of the six participants had not received multicultural educational classes saying they had "grown with the district" as its demographics shifted from a White, non-Hispanic majority to a Hispanic majority. As Ms. James explained about experiences and training regarding diversity, "All the time. Everyday. That's probably all we do. I mean it's just all of our in-services are based on diversity." Ms. Robinson added, "We've had to learn techniques on how to make sure that the students were learning and that we were teaching so that they could learn" (Interview 3-3, 1/22/2011, p. 4).

Part of adapting to changes in district demographics involved learning about the culture and familial experiences of the Hispanic students and learning to work with students for whom English was not a first language. Training was presented by ELL teams. This training involved annual presentations, workshops, and guest speakers. The ELL teams also provided consultations with individual classroom teachers. The diversity training was much more frequent and pervasive than the training the teachers received in working with gifted learners. It focused on remediation and never addressed giftedness as a cultural phenomenon.

### **Teachers Use Personal Beliefs in the Absence of Comprehensive Training**

In the absence of specific training, it is common for individuals to rely on prior experience and personal beliefs to understand and respond to new situations (Pierce et al., 2007). The teachers in this study, lacking specific training in working with diverse gifted students, seemed to rely on personal beliefs to create their understandings of the characteristics of gifted students and cultural competency. Using personal experience as a yardstick by which to measure giftedness could create barriers for identifying and serving diverse gifted students.

When asked how gifted students were identified in the school, Ms. Kelly, a newer second-grade teacher, stated, “I don’t know the process to identify gifted students here in this school...I don’t know what the whole process is since we don’t actually identify them in second grade” (Interview, 2-2, 11/24/2010, p. 1). For a child to be identified as gifted earlier than third grade, a teacher in this district would have to recognize outstanding abilities in the classroom. Ms. Phillips commented, “I think she [Ms. Patrick, the TAG teacher] interprets what we write down as to how gifted they are” (Interview 2-1, 11/24/2010, p. 1). This may pose a problem for many teachers, who like Ms. Kelly and Ms. Phillips, received limited pre-service training. Ms. Phillips described her training as “just the one that you have to take, your undergrad, whatever, exceptional persons” (Interview, 2-1, 11/24/2010, p. 1). Ms. Kelly reflected, “I cannot even tell you the name of the class where we talked about gifted” (Interview 2-2, 11/24/2010, p. 1).

The literature on gifted children lists common characteristics of gifted children such as “reasons well, strong curiosity, wide range of interests, early or avid reader, highly creative, and learns rapidly” (Silverman, 2000, p. 53). When asked to describe the characteristics of gifted children, the participants in this study varied in their responses. Three of the five teachers expressed the idea of a student being *truly gifted* and reported that they had seen only two or three truly gifted students in 15 to 20 years of teaching. However, none were able to verbalize exactly what they meant by *truly gifted* and how the truly gifted students differed from those who had been identified to participate in the school’s Gifted and Talented Program.

What makes it hard to know, for me, if it’s gifted or it’s just they are the top of their class. You have to compare them to the other classes and life in general how would they compare to other kids. It’s probably that they are just above average and not that they are gifted. (Interview 2-1, 1/24/2007, p. 3)

Thus, if teachers have different conceptualizations of what constitutes *truly gifted* it may preclude a student from being recommended simply due to teacher variation. Without the understanding of local norms, teachers may also be using an unrealistic image of gifted when evaluating their students.

The second-grade teachers, who had very limited contact with the TAG coordinator, described gifted students as those who do their work quickly, do not struggle, and complete tasks without asking questions of the teacher. Both teachers used the words *early finishers* to describe students who they would expect to be identified as gifted in third grade. *Early finishers* are not typically found in the lists of characteristics of gifted students and may inhibit the identification of gifted children especially those for whom English is not their first language. (Silverman, 2000). In addition, *early finishers* are often not those students who display divergent thinking, and some gifted children may take more time to imagine a unique response to the questions being asked.

Responses from the third-grade teachers consistently used the phrases *thinking differently* and *requiring challenge* to describe students. Ms. James summed up her description with, "I think a gifted child stands way above and beyond others in just areas of where they're gifted. Like you'll just see something completely different and very inquisitive and probably even can almost be sort of obstinate at times" (Interview 3-3, 1/22/2011, p. 3). All of the third-grade teachers mentioned the need to create more challenges for gifted than for non-gifted students, because gifted students think differently and necessitate making instructional adaptations to accommodate their needs. All three third-grade teachers also expressed the opinion that if the work was not matched to the gifted students' ability, then problem behaviors may surface. Ms. Robinson noted:

They get bored and then they cause problems, and you know I have found that most kids are not a behavior problem if they are challenged. If the lesson is interesting and they're challenged, you know, you don't have behavior issues. It's when they're not, you know, so whose fault is that? (Interview 3-2, 1/22/2011, p. 6)

All of the third-grade teachers responded that gifted students think differently and require challenges that necessitated making instructional adaptations to accommodate their needs.

The teachers' descriptions of gifted students as *early finishers* and *truly gifted* indicated that they had different conceptualizations of the characteristics of gifted students. The inability to articulate the behaviors of a *truly gifted* student hinted that third-grade teachers had a mental model of a student that was performing at levels far above those of the current students. Lack of training and education may impair the teachers' ability to recognize gifted learners in their classrooms. Further, the differences between the second and third-grade teachers' understanding of the students' need for challenge suggests that working with the TAG coordinator has influenced the third-grade teachers' curriculum modifications.

### **Challenges of differentiating instruction with minimal training.**

The teachers described different strategies that they used to support students who showed characteristics of being gifted in a particular subject. The second-grade teachers acknowledged that some of their students might be bored because they already understood the content. However, both teachers also stated that they did not have additional challenges for these students. Ms. Kelly noted, "I look at these kids and I know a lot of them are capable of doing more, but at the same time you don't want to push them too far or make them do too much" (Interview 2-2, 11/24/2010, p. 3). These teachers indicated that they spent more of their energy on differentiating their lessons to support lower achieving students. Ms. Phillips admitted, "I don't always necessarily have the challenge" (Interview 2-1, 11/24/2010, p. 4).

The third-grade teachers varied in their curriculum modifications. Ms. Palmer stated that when she worked with gifted students, she often communicated, "OK, this is below you. You're way beyond this, but be respectful of your peers.' A lot of times I ask them to help me with kids that are having difficulties" (Interview 3-1, 12/2/2010, p. 4). Ms. James indicated that she felt she did not have enough training on accommodating gifted learners: "I don't feel like I'm doing a very good job of being a facilitator for those kids that that's all they need versus the ones that really need to be taught how to think" (Interview 3-3, 1/22/2011, p. 5). She indicated that she collaborates with the principal who provides enrichment activities during the math lesson for students who have demonstrated mastery.

Of the third-grade teachers, Ms. Robinson demonstrated the most in-depth understanding of the curriculum modifications that meet the needs of gifted learners. She stated,

I truly try to make sure that the teaching that I give gifted students is as challenging and as appropriate as it is for every level. Because a lot of times the focus is on the kids that are struggling or the middle kids you know they kind of get it and they're kind of left like 'ok, they can just kind of get along on their own.' I feel very strongly that that's not right. (Interview 3-2, 1/22/2011, p. 5)

The personal belief that every child should receive a challenging and appropriate education prompted Ms. Robinson to create extension activities and to pre-test students to assess their mastery of the lesson being taught. If the students already knew the material, they were provided opportunities to work on activities to deepen their understanding. This teacher had read extensively about gifted students due to both personal and professional interests.

### **Training influences degrees of cultural competency.**

For the purposes of this study, cultural competence refers to a teacher's awareness of how language, family structure, role expectations (for girls, boys, parents, teachers, school), perception of time, religion, and importance attached to the role of multicultural perspectives in class shape interaction with a student (Ford, 2003). The six participants in this study displayed a wide range of variation in their acknowledgement of the cultural diversity in their school. "I've been in this school so long I tend not to see race and everything" (Interview 2-1, 11/24/2010, p. 3) Ms. Phillips commented. According to Ms. Palmer's understanding of cultural differences, "It's family structure, especially in the Hispanics. Girls' roles aren't to be intelligent" (Interview 3-1, 12/2/2010, p. 2).

The principal also provided leadership in working with diverse populations by sending out monthly letters to parents in Spanish and English, which underscored the importance of acknowledging differences to the teachers. Four of the six teachers interviewed had worked in this district for over 16 years and had witnessed the district becoming more diverse. Ms. Robinson stated,

We've had a lot of in-services in diversity plus I feel like I've had a big advantage because I've gone through the growing pains with the district...I went from teaching at the little school in Smithville\*(pseudonym) that you drive by that's closed now that had all Caucasian, mostly rural kids and a few town kids to what I have now and that didn't happen overnight. (Interview 3-2, 1/22/2011, p. 7)

Experiencing the "growing pains" with the district allowed the teachers to develop their own personal attitudes towards working with diverse students. Those receptive to the training that was provided increased awareness of the cultural differences. Others did not. Ms. Phillips noted a change in her perception: "I don't know how good or bad that it is that I don't see it as much but I don't notice it as much. It doesn't stick out like when I first started obviously" (Interview 2-1, 11/24/2010, p. 4). Ms. Palmer responded, "I've been here a long time. I don't see those (racial differences), I see them as kids" (Interview 3-1, 12/2/2010, p. 2). Ms. Robinson expressed a different attitude of recognizing the hurdles that ethnically diverse students may face.

I really talk to the students about how the slaves were forbidden to read and write and why and how lack of knowledge or how knowledge is power...I want them inspired and not feeling drug down or putting up excuses or anything else. I want the 'I Can' attitude. (Interview 3-2, 1/22/2011, p. 7)

Ms. Kelly is in her second year teaching at the school and described her experience in these words. "I haven't had bad experiences, for the most part, yet. But sometimes I feel like I teach two different cultures here" (Interview 2-2, 11/24/2010, p. 3). As a teacher who is new to the school, she has not had the opportunity to "grow" with the school as her colleagues have had. The results show that cultural awareness is a matter of individual teachers recognizing or ignoring the importance of the expectations parents and teachers have in educating Hispanic children.

### **Teachers Perceive Barriers for Diverse Students Participating in Gifted Programming**

When asked, "What barriers do you see for particular groups of students being identified for gifted programs?", all of the teachers identified language and poverty as barriers. Ms. Robinson indicated, "I get some with no English and there's so much intellect there but they're not able to demonstrate it" (Interview 3-2, 1/22/2011, p. 7). The teachers expressed the feeling that the lack of familiarity with the English language was keeping diverse learners from being identified for gifted programming.

Three of the five teachers stated poverty was a large barrier to students participation in gifted programming. The teachers reported that the regional education association (AEA) held special programs for advanced students in the summer, but the cost to attend these classes was beyond the financial capability of many low-income students, even with financial aid. In a school district with 65% of the student population being eligible for free-or-reduced lunch, costs to take tests through the local university and transportation to the test sites made it unrealistic that these students could participate in programming outside of the school district. The lack of family resources presented a barrier for diverse, gifted students from low-income families to participate in gifted programming especially programming that occurred outside of the school district. Ms. James also identified poverty as influencing the students' performance in school and on standardized tests, which ultimately could influence their lack of participation in gifted programming. "You know poverty. They have no background knowledge. You know a lot of our kids that are not exposed to a lot of things you know so I think that's an issue" (Interview 3-3, 1/22/2011, p. 5).

Ms. Patrick, the TAG coordinator, identified her lack of time as a barrier to providing more opportunities for gifted students in this school district. As the sole person providing gifted programming and instruction for an entire district, Ms. Patrick had limited time to provide more training to teachers. She was required to create the curriculum for the gifted programs, work with the teachers to support students in the classrooms, and create a new talent development

program for ELLs. Thus, time to create additional opportunities for these learners was non-existent.

### **Discussion**

As of 1980, teacher licensure in this state required pre-service teachers to take at least one course on multicultural education. The aims of these courses vary from recognizing cultural diversity to educating teachers about the power differential that exists in society and education (Gorski, 2009). Most courses tend to celebrate diversity and provide limited strategies to incorporate a multicultural approach to educating students. However, the requirement that pre-service teachers spend at least one semester learning about diversity and reflecting on their future teaching practices with diverse students provides minimal preparation. Teachers who received their licensure prior to the 1980 did not even have a semester. These teachers have had to rely on school district professional development opportunities or on personal experience. In this school district, which was made up of 65% Hispanic students, the ELL team was on-site and worked with teachers daily to help them meet the needs of diverse students.

Teacher licensure requirements in this state do not require pre-service teachers to receive training to work with gifted students in their classrooms. Certification requires “completion of the exceptional learner program, which must include preparation that contributes to the education of individuals with disabilities and the gifted and talented” (IC 282-13.18(3)). This requirement is often accomplished by one or two sessions on gifted learners within a course on exceptional students that focuses primarily on students with disabilities. The lack of training may have a direct impact on the education of gifted students as reported by Moon and Brighton (2008).

The amount of staff may also explain the difference in the amount and quality of in-service training teachers receive on working with diverse students and gifted students. In this school district, one person was responsible for all of the services for gifted and talented students. Their responsibilities included teacher training, identification, and programming at the elementary, junior high, and high schools, as well as teaching the gifted students themselves. In comparison, the ELL team had four teachers. Two teachers were in the elementary school, one was in the junior high school, and one in the high school. Ms. Patrick expressed her concern about having no time to plan for lessons and wondering how long she can keep up the pace of “just going,” from group to group. Expecting one person to provide the training and intervention for diverse and gifted students for an entire district may be unrealistic.

Teachers used two phrases that revealed their reliance on personal beliefs. In part, this may be because training in multicultural education and gifted education is not integrated, leaving them in an informational void. Although teachers recognized that a child who is always an *early finisher* is suggestive of something, it was not clear that finishing early was interpreted as meaning the same thing depending on the

child's language/culture. Also, the evidence showed finishing early did not lead to appropriately matching instruction to the child's ability. The fact that some teachers were not challenging students who may well have been capable indicated a lack of knowledge about the cognitive needs of such students.

The other indicator, *truly gifted*, was a phrase invoked when a teacher did not know what to look for, or had a mental model that cannot be satisfied, hence statements such as not having seen such a student in 15-20 years of teaching. A teacher mentioned that top of the class could mean a child is gifted, but if the class is generally low, rising to the top may not mean the child is gifted in a larger setting. This may be especially true if the teacher is making an uninformed implicit comparison. These statements about a child merely being above average in the larger world but a high achiever in class indicated that the TAG teacher's understanding of the use of local norms to identify possible gifted children had not been communicated to the teachers. Lohman (2005b) suggested that comparing students to those with similar backgrounds and experiences may provide evidence that the high achieving students of that group would benefit from a talent development program. Although the TAG teacher had created a bridge program to provide talent development for high achieving ELL students, it appeared that some teachers were not aware of the criteria for inclusion.

### **Unidentified Barriers**

Interestingly, none of the participants, identified lack of training in working with gifted learners as a barrier to students' participation in gifted programming. All of the teachers reported receiving minimal instruction in understanding the needs of gifted learners in their teacher preparation programs and receiving only handouts and a once-a-year in-service training from the TAG coordinator. Yet they did not mention their lack of training as a factor influencing their ability to identify gifted students. Ms. James indicated that she felt all teachers needed more training in how to work with gifted students. However, when asked to identify barriers that may prevent students from being identified for or participating in gifted programming, teacher training was not included.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers working within a system and acting on their own experiences and beliefs in the absence of training may influence the opportunities presented to racially and culturally diverse, gifted students. Beliefs regarding individual differences and knowledge of the needs of diverse, gifted students play an important role in how teachers respond to the challenge of educating these students. These types of decisions regarding how to interact with diverse learners may produce very different results in the relationships between teachers and students than those that see all children as the same both culturally and cognitively.

Teachers may also influence racially and culturally diverse, gifted students in the ways in which they interact with these students. Consistent with the

findings of Worrell (2009), the teachers in this study reported interactions along a continuum from supportive such as providing differentiated instruction and challenge for gifted students, to ignoring needs by having all students complete the same work, even when the teachers acknowledge that some students already have mastered the material.

This study highlights the need for integrated training for working with ELL and gifted students. The TAG teacher never indicated that she interacted with the ELL team or attended their training for the general education teachers. More telling, when teachers described their training from the ELL team, working with advanced ability students was never mentioned. Moon and Brighton (2008) reported that greater than 30% of their participants indicated that the potential for academic giftedness is *not* present in all socioeconomic groups. This may preclude teachers from looking for indications of giftedness in students who are economically disadvantaged. By denying students their racial and cultural diversity, teachers are denying the history and experiences of minority students living in a country that historically has been dominated by White non-Hispanics. The ELL and TAG teachers have a tremendous opportunity for including important aspects of both of their specialties in training to include discussion of gifted Hispanic students.

Lack of understanding of the unique needs of gifted learners may prevent teachers from identifying these needs in their students. Racially and culturally diverse students may pose an even bigger dilemma for teachers because language or cultural differences may mask the characteristics that an untrained professional may associate with giftedness. Failure to respond to the need for challenge or differentiated instruction may send unintended messages of stereotypes to academically advanced, diverse students who are already aware that society at large sees them as less capable than their White peers. By including some aspects of culturally diverse gifted students in ELL training it will highlight the need for teachers to actively search for signs of advanced ability. Similarly, including aspects of cultural diversity in TAG training, especially when training on identification, may increase teachers' awareness of the characteristics of gifted students even when English is not their first language.

### **Limitations**

We conducted our interviews at a specific time and place to understand the perceptions of teachers' training and experiences with diverse and gifted students; thus, the results cannot be generalized beyond the boundaries of the case. We were interested in understanding the teachers' perceptions at that moment. As unique individuals with their own personal beliefs, the teachers responded to the interview questions within the respective stages of their teaching careers. Changes may have occurred since our interviews, and the teachers' may have modified

their outlooks and understanding regarding diverse, gifted students and their needs; thus our presence may have had an unintended advocacy effect and the findings may no longer be applicable to the individual teachers in their current practice. We also cannot overlook the possible selection bias that may have entered into our study. We chose second- and third-grade teachers purposively; however, if we had extended the sample to include all of the teachers at the school, our results may have been different.

### **Implications**

As gatekeepers to programming for gifted learners, teachers play an influential role in the educational experience of diverse, gifted students. The ability to correctly identify gifted students and adequately meet their academic needs is critical as teachers seek to provide an appropriate curriculum. The Federal law now mandates that teachers have the skills to serve these students. However, as shown in this study, professional development opportunities are rare for current teachers, and courses on educating gifted learners are not typically required for pre-service teachers. It is important that resources are invested to provide adequate training to allow teachers to identify and meet the needs of these students. A critical opportunity to infuse the ELL and TAG training with an understanding of the characteristics and needs of gifted Hispanic learners has been uncovered as a way to strengthen the services of both programs.

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#### Appendix A – Semi-Structured Interview Questions Classroom Teachers

1. What are the typical characteristics of gifted students (i.e., what does a gifted student “look like”)?
2. Tell me about any experiences and training that you’ve had about gifted students.
3. How did your experiences and training help you develop your picture of what a typical gifted student looks like?
4. Tell me about the exceptionally bright students, not just those who have been formally identified as gifted, that you’ve had in your classroom.
5. Were there differences in gender or an equal balance of boys and girls? Race/school interests? Economic status? Extra curriculars?
6. Do you modify your lesson plans for the students you think are exceptionally bright? To accommodate learners of higher ability? If so how?
7. How are gifted students identified in your school/district
8. What do you think of that process? If you were assigned to coordinate the gifted program in your school, would you make any changes?
9. Do you see any differences in your classroom among different student groups in terms of their involvement in class discussions or work habits?
10. What are any barriers that you see for particular groups of students being identified for gifted programs?
11. Once students are identified, do you see any barriers that would affect their participation in the program?

#### Appendix B – Semi-Structured Interview Questions TAG Coordinator

1. What does a gifted child "look like"
2. How does the talent development program work?
3. Tell me about any experiences and training that you've had regarding gifted students.
4. How does the whole identification process work with the teachers? Do the teachers nominate kids first, do you look at the test scores and then ask them to look at the students?
5. Do you ever give the teachers ideas for things that they could do or do they come to you and ask for things?

6. Have you noticed any differences as far as gender, race, school interest, economic status, extra-curricular for the kids that are in your program or that you work with? Differences amongst the kids who participate?
7. What about from a racial make-up? Do you have about the same number of Hispanic and non-Hispanic students?
8. Is the percentage of kids in the district at the poverty level pretty much the same with the kids who participate in your group?
9. How do you think background influences whether or not a kid participates in gifted programming?
10. Are there barriers that either prevent kids from being identified or prevent kids from participating once they've been identified?
11. Is there anything that would help me understand the teachers' attitudes and perceptions about gifted students, effects of students in the classroom and how they interact with the students?
12. What about the teachers' understanding of gifted students? Do they understand and know about the needs of gifted students?