



# WHERE ARE GIFTED STUDENTS OF COLOR?

CASE STUDIES OUTLINE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE DIVERSITY IN GIFTED PROGRAMS

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**E**ducators are learners: Most of them know that there is always more to know. The question, then, is not whether educators should engage in professional learning, but in what areas they should focus to best serve students.

In the difficult process of choosing

and designing professional learning, the needs of some students tend to get overlooked. Due to a lack of federal legislation and requirements, gifted students are often forgotten by the educational system at large, and, in turn, district professional development catalogs omit an ongoing understanding of this population.

The needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students such as Native American, black, Hispanic, bilingual, and English language learners (Ford, 2014) are often overlooked as well. Together, these trends create a big hole in professional learning opportunities: supporting gifted students of color.

## Professional learning is essential to increase educators' awareness of the needs of students who do not share their cultural or class backgrounds.

According to the federal definition of giftedness, gifted children show “evidence of higher performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields” and should receive services designed to help them develop fully those capacities (No Child Left Behind, 2002).

Giftedness occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, yet students of color are underrepresented in gifted programs (Ford, 2014). By underserved, we mean that the identified population (gifted students) is not similar to the general population from which it is drawn.

For example, consider a school with 1,000 students, 50% of whom are Hispanic, 25% white, and 25% black. If the gifted program accepts 15% of the student body, that group of 150 students should include 75 Hispanic students, 37 white students, and 37 black students. But too often, nonwhite students are underrepresented in gifted programs.

Researchers have found that this phenomenon may be linked to assessment and identification instruments such as standardized tests or identification checklists, which can often be culturally biased. It may also be linked to teachers' lack of knowledge about giftedness and implicit bias about students of color (Lewis, Novak, & Coronado, 2015; Irby & Lara-Alecio, 1996).

Professional learning strategies can help narrow the representation gap and increase diversity in programs for the gifted. Because personal beliefs and experiences influence instruction, professional learning is essential to increase educators' awareness of the needs of students who do not share their cultural or class backgrounds.

There is also reason to believe that teachers recognize the need for this kind of opportunity. In Burkman's (2012) study on preparing novice teachers for success in elementary classrooms, participants identified teaching gifted and talented students in the top 25% of challenges they face in the classroom.

### STANDARDS IN GIFTED EDUCATION

A starting place for increasing professional learning to benefit underserved gifted populations is the National Association for Gifted Children's National Standards in Gifted and Talented Education.

Four sets of standards cover a variety of stakeholders: one set provides skills for general education teachers, the second details standards for advanced practitioners in the field of gifted education, the third lists teacher preparation standards for gifted specialists, and the final set highlights professional learning design and evaluation standards.

These standards serve as

benchmarks to guide professional learning for preservice and inservice teachers. They provide direction for gaining expertise in meeting the needs of gifted learners. These standards, supported by research, emphasize the knowledge and skills to become an exemplary teacher in the field.

Johnsen (2012), who writes about standards in the field and their effects on professional competence, reminds us that it is students who reap the benefits of high standards for teachers. In addition to covering evidence-based practices that teachers should use with gifted students, the National Association for Gifted Children's standards call on educators to reflect on professional learning efforts with students' outcomes in mind.

By providing systematic, ongoing professional learning that requires educators to assess instructional practices, includes regular follow-up, and requires evidence of teacher implementation and resulting student outcomes, as suggested by National Association for Gifted Children's standards, research-based professional learning practices can facilitate teacher change.

When these professional learning experiences address underserved populations, changes in teacher practice can contribute to a reversal of the underrepresentation plaguing K-12 gifted education programs.

## LEARNING FROM CASE STUDIES

While the best way for educators to analyze and reflect on various situations in education is through hands-on practice, it is not always easy or even possible to organize the wide range of experiences that educators may encounter when working with gifted learners. To address this, two books of case studies highlight critical issues related to meeting the needs of gifted and talented students (Weber, Boswell, & Behrens, 2014) and differentiating instruction (Weber, Behrens, & Boswell, 2016).

Using case studies as a vehicle to support sustained professional learning serves several goals and purposes. Case studies allow teachers to imagine themselves in settings they might not have encountered, have yet to encounter, or have encountered but were not sure how to proceed. Even more importantly, engaging in ongoing discussions about different teaching and learning models and strategies with an opportunity to integrate the learning into the classroom supports job-embedded practice.

In addition, case studies are an excellent resource to support professional learning communities (PLCs). Each case includes a variety of issues for analysis, encouraging mentoring, coaching, and demonstration lessons. Most importantly, case studies invite reflection about and evaluation of teaching. Analyzing cases in a workshop format within the school setting such as PLCs can empower staff to use decision-making strategies (Weber, Boswell, & Behrens, 2014).

The cases in these two books are suitable for a variety of audiences, including parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators. Readers can work in pairs or small groups to investigate and analyze the scenarios. Each case study starts with a brief overview that

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introduces the case and sets the stage for a learning scenario narrative.

Within each case, a short introduction guides the reader's thinking without imparting an explicit action, recommendation, or solution. Discussion questions, activities, extensions, and suggestions for additional readings support the standards. Aligning the cases with standards in the field helps educators expand their content and instructional repertoires with a focus on improving student growth.

One case study involves Jessica, an 11-year-old twice-exceptional student. (Twice-exceptional students have both gifted and special education needs.) Her classroom and achievement test scores are typically in the average to low-average range. This is somewhat of a surprise given her 3rd-grade Cognitive Abilities Test score of 129 and past participation in the elementary gifted program.

Jessica's parents are concerned about the apparent discrepancy between their daughter's efforts and achievement. Jessica's parents are not aware that Jessica reads very slowly, often rereading passages many times for basic comprehension. They have no idea how hard she works or how frustrated she is about schoolwork. The case study encourages educators to explore how students with special needs who are gifted and learning disabled can be challenged in the classroom and

what course of action educators can take to address those needs.

Another case study introduces educators to important issues of cultural competency — the ability of people to successfully interact with and understand others whose culture differs from their own. For educators of the gifted, cultural competency is one of the most essential skill sets to better identify and support gifted students from underrepresented populations.

Gifted learners from diverse backgrounds may need complex support that acknowledges and respects the hidden rules of culture. In this case study, Raul, a high school student and the son of immigrant parents, appears to lack the motivation and engagement to attend class.

The ability to successfully interact with and understand others whose cultures differ from their own is necessary if educators are to identify students, such as Raul, from underrepresented populations. The case study encourages educators to consider the ongoing impact of culture on students, such as the role of family and community, the values of self-sufficiency and family support, and the corresponding lack of dependence on outside assistance, and the complexity of attendance issues in Hispanic and Latino cultures.

Furthermore, an essential understanding for educators is that generational poverty impacts what students think about themselves, school, and aspirations for the future (Weber, Boswell, & Behrens, 2014).

## GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

We recommend the following guidelines for designing professional learning.

**Take a pulse.** Facilitators should conduct a brief survey of teacher beliefs before beginning any professional



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learning activity. It is critical that this survey be confidential so that everyone feels comfortable responding honestly. The results provide a pulse of teacher perceptions toward the underserved populations to guide professional learning.

Like all pulses, it needs to be monitored throughout the sessions so that facilitators can assess areas of growth and continuing concerns. This survey should focus on the topic of the professional learning. For example, if cultural competency is the focus, the Colorado Department of Education (2010) has an equity toolkit for administrators that includes a self-assessment for teachers and administrators, available at [www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/equitytoolkit](http://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/equitytoolkit).

**Create a safe zone.** Professional learning allows teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators to come together to discuss ideas of what works in their classrooms. Facilitators who guide the discussions maintain a safe environment where everyone can feel comfortable sharing ideas and expressing concerns.

Creating a safe place to discuss ideas is critical in increasing awareness of underserved populations of gifted and talented learners. Everyone needs to feel comfortable in sharing his or her thoughts, ideas, and questions. For example, in conversations about gifted black students, teachers may share generalizations or misconceptions about race and ask questions about culture. Providing a safe space to do so is essential for the growth of the teacher.

**Provide training that is uniquely tailored.** Facilitators should design professional learning based on the pulse survey results and the unique student body of the school and district. Pay close attention to underserved populations: English language learners, twice-exceptional, and minority groups.

For example, when engaging in professional learning on the twice-exceptional population, the presenter might survey teachers and focus on meeting the needs of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder/gifted students, learning disabled/gifted, and others, incorporating research, specific examples, and professional learning activities relevant to teachers' needs and the school population. Partnering with special education teachers can facilitate communication and co-teaching.

Research shows that targeted professional learning has a direct impact on teacher perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and understandings (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Similarly, educators should engage in differentiated professional learning based on results of their pulse surveys.

**Share culturally relevant information.** Culturally relevant information addresses special populations' cultural traits, unique characteristics, challenges, and success stories, while also acknowledging that students are individuals with unique stories whose family culture may not fit that generalized mold.

Professional learning needs to explore culture below the tip of the iceberg (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2004). Facilitators and participants must dig below the visible aspects of culture to get to the heart of what makes up the culture through sharing and dialogue, acknowledging that in a culturally focused session, everyone has knowledge and experience that they bring to the table.

**Lead courageous conversations.** Candid conversations about underserved populations are important to changing teacher beliefs and increasing awareness of underserved populations. These conversations happen when there is a safe environment and accurate information about underserved populations.

### **Engage culturally diverse families.**

Parents are a key component to the success of students in the classroom, but parental involvement can be a struggle for educators. Coaching can help teachers learn how to reach out to parents from underserved populations and engage them in their child's education. Parents may have misconceptions about the gifted and talented program, which can inhibit the student's identification and enrollment in the program; parental involvement can mitigate this barrier.

**Encourage collaboration, capitalize on strengths.** Give teachers opportunities to share successful strategies with each other. While a school may have staff support to serve under-identified populations of gifted and talented students, teachers may not be aware of it or take advantage of it. For example, teaming with ELL instructional specialists can help teachers of gifted classes learn strategies for supporting ELL students and therefore be better able to identify and teach them.

Great teachers are lifelong learners eager to look for ways to improve their instructional strategies and meet students' needs. Professional learning should provide teachers with a safe learning environment to explore case studies, ask questions, and develop a school culture that is culturally responsive and aware of underserved populations.

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leadership and collaboration (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018a, 2018b) and to recognize the ever-present press of political, economic, and societal factors — for example, how personal and group identity demographics as well as bureaucratic and accountability mandates influence group dynamics.

Developing a language and lens to understand and converse about urgent challenges is necessary — in our group norms, in the leadership and teamwork we model, and in the everyday ways we come together across lines of difference to make schools better places for students and one another.

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