Gifted Programming Identification Procedures: A Hidden Curriculum

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Abstract

Monocultural notions of intelligence are crippling the field of gifted education and often, whether explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate inequity and disproportionalit in both theory and practice, especially regarding how children are identified as gifted (Cross, 2021; Owens et al., 2018). This paper briefly examines the history of the conceptualization of giftedness and posits that gifted programming identification procedures represent a unique and dangerous hidden curriculum. Drawing from theory on critical hope and positionality, two tables are presented; one to examine hokey versus critical gifted programing practices, and one to examine dehumanizing versus humanizing gifted identification procedures. These tables are intended to generate discussion on what happens when new ways of conceptualizing giftedness meet old ways of understanding, informing, and ordering the field of gifted education.

Keywords: gifted education, gifted identification, hidden curriculum, critical hope

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Introduction
What is giftedness? At the beginning of the 20th century, giftedness was conceptualized as limited to the realm of intellectual functioning, with exceptionally high IQ scores acting as the main criterion for considerations of giftedness (Coleman & Cross, 2005 as cited in Miller, 2011, p. 94). Such conceptualizations began to develop surrounding, in specific, American eugenicist Lewis Terman’s revision of the intelligence test published by French scholars Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon (Brookwood, 2016). Terman explicitly noted that intelligence tests would be used to further the agenda of “race hygiene” and “eliminate degeneracy” (Brookwood, 2016); such tests would go on in an attempt to “prove” other races “possessed limited intelligence and were therefore not quite fully human” but rather “less evolved creatures and therefore not subject to humane treatment” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 2; Younge, 2021, verse 19). Since its conception, the field of gifted education has systematically encapsulated ethnocentric perspectives and practices, with foundations rooted in White, Western traditions and definitions of cultural heritage, history, values, language, and beliefs (Owens et al., 2018).

Such monocultural notions of intelligence are crippling the field of gifted education and often, whether explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate inequity and disproportionality in both theory and practice, especially in regard to how children are identified as gifted (Cross, 2021; Owens et al., 2018). While many gifted programs claim to both consider and use humanizing, qualitative criterion for identification, many ultimately fall back on dehumanizing identification criterion, such as test data and cutoff scores from mainstream standardized tests, to act as all-defining indicators of giftedness. In this regard, gifted identification procedures make up a uniquely dangerous hidden curriculum – one founded in the standardized, reductive nature of identification practices that inherently set up gatekeepers and create a ripple-effect in overall provided (or not) gifted education programming and services.

Positionality and Gifted Programming

Johnson-Bailey (2012) asserts that considering positionality in conversations surrounding the traditional, ethnocentric education canon lends toward critically questioning, and subsequently transforming, said canon. As such, it’s important to first consider positionality as it relates to overall gifted programming and services, as it is positionality that allows stakeholders within the field of gifted education to ask questions such as “what position/perspective informs gifted education and what position/perspective is omitted?” as well as “what happens when new ways of conceptualizing giftedness meet old ways of understanding, informing, and ordering the field of gifted education?” (adapted from Johnson-Bailey, 2012, p. 261). Many school districts, whether public or private, often boast inclusive, dynamic gifted education philosophies; however, their actual day-to-day programming practices (such as identification procedures) tend to be dehumanizing, rather than humanizing, in nature (see Table 1).

Moreover, the issue of gifted programming philosophy versus practice aligns well with Duncan-Andrade’s (2009) notion of hokey hope versus critical hope. School districts often implore gifted program philosophies that project “some kind of multicultural, middle-class opportunity structure that is inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of working-class, urban youth of color” (p. 183). On the flipside, critical hope encourages gifted philosophies and practices that aim for the ongoing development of program quality, resources, and networks students have equitable access to. In this regard, gifted programming better engages in a sharing, re-visioning, and enlargement of learner narratives while also expanding current understandings of what giftedness is conceptually (Charaniya, 2012; Wells, 2021).

Table 1

| Gifted Programming Practices |
|-----------------------------|---|
| **Hokey programming practices** | District/school gifted education philosophies that do not match with operational practices – hokey hope vs. critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) |

| Gifted Identification Procedures |
Circling back to positionality, the question “what position/perspective informs gifted education and what position/perspective is omitted?” also applies to gifted identification procedures; what position/perspective informs gifted identification and what position/perspective is being omitted? While many gifted programs claim to both consider and use humanizing, qualitative criterion for identification (such as portfolios of artwork, multilingualism, community involvement, passion projects, etc.), many ultimately fall back on dehumanizing identification criterion, such as the exclusive use of test data. By nature, the idea that a standardized test and/or test data can single-handedly assess any marker of giftedness supports reductive, mechanistic qualities of education and promotes a “one-size-fits-all paradigm” (Salazar, 2013, p. 124).

In reaction, in school districts where dehumanizing gifted identification procedures and practices obviously do not align with their humanizing gifted philosophies (see Table 2), students may be allowed to be tested for giftedness, but those tests inherently keep them from actually being identified and receiving appropriate services (Wells, 2021). Moreover, if a student does happen to be identified as gifted in a nontraditional, non-standardized domain (such as art, leadership, music, etc.), most gifted programming and services are still systematically designed around traditional academics that are saturated in hokey hope and monocultural notions of intelligence that are designed to better serve White, middle-class populations of students (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Owens et al., 2018). Gifted identification, on a variety of levels, thus becomes a hidden curriculum and “silence and exclusion [of non-Western ways of knowing] are parts of [that] hidden curriculum” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 5).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gifted education identification procedures</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dehumanizing identification procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use a standardized test as a singular marker of giftedness (Wells, 2021; Salazar, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanizing identification procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand that the dualities of giftedness may manifest in positive and negative ways – such as leadership skills (Wells, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge that giftedness exists on an ongoing, developmental spectrum (Wells, 2021)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concluding Thoughts

What happens when new ways of conceptualizing giftedness meet old ways of understanding, informing, and ordering the field of gifted education? To genuinely pursue equity and proportionality within gifted programming and services, it is imperative that educational researchers and practitioners explore humanizing how the field of gifted education conceptualizes giftedness, particularly through investigative measures that emphasize diverse, culturally responsive ways of conceptualizing giftedness. The tables examining hokey versus critical gifted programming practices as well as dehumanizing versus humanizing gifted identification procedures are intended to generate discussion surrounding such possible conceptualizations of giftedness. Researchers may also consider the intersection of creativity theory and critical hope toward understanding and supporting diverse conceptualizations of giftedness. Moreover, critical research that drives the field of gifted education to examine existing programming and policy in both concept and theory, rather than simply focusing on refining methods for identifying students for existing programs, should be considered (Peterson, 1999). However, such research may beg the question – is the concept of giftedness in-and-of-itself emblematic of white, Western ways of knowing and being?

References


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