

Identification of English Learner Gifted From Parents' Perspective: Challenges and Recommendations¹

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School-family partnerships, while shown to be beneficial for all students, might be particularly beneficial for gifted English Learners (ELs) since schools have struggled to identify these students due to language and cultural barriers (Nichol, 2013). Also, parental involvement in a child's education can have positive benefits for student learning and achievement (Bicknell, 2014). The encouragement, instruction and support that parents provide can help to develop student talent and create an achievement-oriented atmosphere that aligns with students' school environment (Cho & Campbell, 2010). Despite what is known about the benefits of parental involvement, there is little research on specific strategies that schools use to engage parents of gifted ELs. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to explore how parents of gifted ELs understand the identification process. We did so through the following research questions:

1. How do parents of gifted ELs understand their school's gifted identification process and what are their experiences with school communication?
2. What do they perceive are the greatest challenges to assessing and identifying their children who are/were English learners for gifted programming?

Perspectives

Strong school-family connection and engagement can result in higher achievement, more consistent attendance, and better social skills for students (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011). Moreover, parental involvement could also help mitigate the unique challenges that ELs may experience such as linguistic discontinuity, discrimination, and cultural differences between home and school environments (Cropper, 1998). Research has also demonstrated the benefits for parents and teachers: parents feel more efficacious in guiding their children through school and more prepared to deal with student challenges; while teachers gain a better understanding of the family's goals for their children and experience greater job satisfaction (Li & Hung, 2012).

Methods

Data Sources/Sampling

Data consisted of 14 focus group interviews, field notes, and gifted program plans. Data were collected in 14 elementary and middle schools across 8 school districts in three states. Schools' percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch ranged from 55% to 99%, while percentage of ELs ranged from 19% to 77%. The majority of schools were located in large suburbs or large cities. Group participants ranged from 1 to 14 parents of students who were identified as gifted English language learners by school staff.

Analysis

We reviewed transcripts for thematic trends and then selected six using a form of maximum variation sampling where a sample is chosen that includes a wide range of diversity related to the phenomena of interest (Merriam, 2009). The sample reflected variation in location, group size, school type, languages, and SES. We analyzed data inductively through the constant comparative

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method to identify patterns in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and followed the three phases of coding, *open*, *axial*, and *selective* (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Final codes were decided through consensus.

Results

Description of “Giftedness”

When asked how parents would describe what it meant to be “gifted,” their responses tended to center around behaviors, traits, and academic performance. Behaviors that parents cited included reading advanced books, meeting parent and teacher expectations, asking a lot of questions, and demonstrating active engagement. Regarding traits, parents’ responses fell into one of two classifications: intellectual traits such as speed of learning and reasoning skills or social-emotional traits such as maturity, altruism, and sensitivity. One parent noted that her child is “very sensitive to the information he [hears]. For example, he [is often] worried about the ozone things and . . . when he hears news, he’s very sensitive to [the] news as well, like oh my God, this is going to happen.” Parents also ultimately associated giftedness with achievement and strong academic performance.

Perceptions of the Identification Process

Overwhelmingly, parents reported the presence of language barriers negatively impacting the identification process either for themselves or other parents of ELs they knew. This is exemplified by one Latino American parent who shared that for recent Mexican immigrant children, “they’re not able to show what they know because the language is a barrier for them.”

Experiences with School Communication

Parents also reported trouble in understanding the identification process, partly due to language barriers impeding communication with teachers and school personnel. Parents were minimally involved in the identification process, often only contacted to fill out evaluation consent forms and notified regarding program placement. Teachers acted as gatekeepers or facilitators in the process, usually initiating the process and were the main source of information regarding the process and decisions. In a few cases, parents advocated for their children’s learning by reaching out to their teachers for advanced work or services. One parent wished she had advocated earlier but at the time, “didn’t know parents [had] those kind of rights.”

Challenges to Assessment and Identification

Early identification was noted as a challenge for parents. While young children may exhibit promising verbal abilities such as early language acquisition in their first language or advanced skills in areas such as math, they were overlooked due to their lack of English fluency. One Haitian American parent purposely chose not to teach her native language to her children because she “wanted them to speak properly.” It is telling that at time of gifted identification which typically occurred in third grade, the majority of gifted EL students were no longer classified as English learners.

Discussion

While bi- or multi-lingualism is a beneficial skill, evidence from this study suggests that parents perceive EL status as problematic in the context of gifted program identification. It is also clear that there is a disconnect between schools and EL parents and that teachers play vital roles in bridging the gap. According to a recent systematic literature review on best practices for identifying and serving gifted ELs, a successful EL identification model is “characterized by a combination of school staff and parent involvement in identifying gifted ELs for appropriate services” (p. 26) and that “strategies must be employed to increase parental involvement and cooperation” in that process (Mun et al., 2016, p. 24). Educator and parent partnerships should be actively cultivated for the success of identifying and serving gifted EL students.

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