Tips for Identifying Gifted EL Students

from the National Center for Research on Gifted Education

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English learners (ELs) are the fastest growing population of learners in the United States. However, despite the growing numbers of ELs, their representation in gifted identification and programming continues to lag behind not only traditional populations of learners from advantaged communities, but also other underserved populations of learners. The United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights indicates that 2% of ELs are enrolled in gifted and talented programs, as compared to 7% of non-ELs. Historically, there is an under-representation of students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse communities in gifted and talented programs. Identification procedures and policies have been cited as the crux of the problem.

Improving identification of EL students, as well as students from other underserved populations, for gifted programs requires a new paradigm that centers around identifying students’ strengths, rather than focusing on their weaknesses. Under this paradigm, every stakeholder, from EL service providers to school psychologists to classroom teachers to parents/guardians/caretakers, form a web of communication and serve as talent scouts.

Professional development creates an opportunity to improve school personnel’s awareness of EL issues related to identification. This increased awareness results in changes in identification practices, the evolution of a web of communication among all stakeholders, and modifications in program services.

Changes in identification practices include providing pre-identification opportunities to encourage emergence of talents, using universal screening to avoid overlooking talented students, setting alternative pathways to identification to increase opportunities for talents to be recognized, frequently screening students to identify students whose talents manifest later, and using culturally appropriate assessments, such as testing in the student’s native language.

Each of these practices has the potential to increase the number of ELs identified for gifted services. The evolution of a web of communication promotes awareness of EL talent among all stakeholders (e.g., administrators, district gifted coordinators; gifted specialists; parents/guardians/caretakers; EL specialists, classroom teachers, school psychologists, or counselors). This encourages the practice of stakeholders serving as talent scouts. It also increases the trustworthiness of communications among the stakeholders about opportunities for talent development.

Improved awareness of EL identification issues results in modifications to program services that involve inclusion of culturally responsive curriculum and adding support services to ensure ELs are successful in gifted and talented programs. These modifications increase trustworthiness in communication among stakeholders and improve acceptance rates and placement of ELs in the gifted and talented program.