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## **Incorporating Community Perceptions in the Identification of Gifted and Talented Hispanic Students**

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In recent years there has been an increased interest in determining the most appropriate means for identifying the linguistically and culturally diverse gifted and talented (G/T) student. Existing biases and lack of awareness regarding the needs and characteristics of these students have hindered the process of

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determining the most appropriate identification procedures. Although experts in the field of G/T education have advised educators to focus their attention on the characteristics most valued by the child's own culture when assessing and instructing these students (Torrance, 1978; Bernal, 1974, 1981), little or no community voice is used at the present to determine identification criteria in programs serving minority language students (Bermúdez & Rakow, in press). This has led to identification procedures which only spotlight those youngsters who most apparently fit the norm used by the schools. The purpose of the present study is to explore the perceptions that the Hispanic community holds regarding their G/T youngsters in an effort to redirect the attention of teachers and parents to a more relevant set of criteria for identifying these students adequately.

Giftedness is a universal phenomenon. Every culture produces its gifted musicians, artists, statespeople, political leaders, and scientists. Conservative estimates claim that 3% of the school population in the United States is gifted (Cohen, 1988). However, underrepresentation of minorities in specialized programs shows the schools' lack of ability to identify these students adequately (Bermudez & Rakow, in press; Bernal & Reyna, 1974; Frasier, 1979; Gay, 1978; Machado, 1987).

The common ground for identifying G/T students is found in the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 (PL 97-35) which provides a set of generic characteristics of G/T students:

[Gifted children are] children who give evidence of high performance capabilities in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership capacity, or specific academic fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities. According to this definition, all G/T youngsters, including the culturally and linguistically diverse, exhibit behaviors which set them apart from their peers. Although this definition does not indicate any biases or cultural preferences, school systems continue to interpret it in an elitist fashion by applying norms and identification procedures which cater exclusively to white middle-class youngsters (Cohen, 1988). These procedures hinge on standardized measures normed without adequate representation of minority groups (Bermúdez, Rakow, Marquez, & Sawyer, 1991), and in the process, students who are culturally diverse, linguistically diverse, or both, are overlooked. Due to stereotypes associated with low socio-economic status and limited English proficiency, it is common practice for society to readily accept these students as disadvantaged, but it has difficulty conceiving of them as gifted (Melesky, 1985).

Bernal (1981) found that only the more acculturated minority students participate in the screening process beyond the initial stages. Since the home

experiences of the middle and upper income minority families are similar to those found in the school experience, and since the acculturated minority students demonstrate fluency in standard English, it is much more likely that this type of student will be identified even if more traditional measures of assessment for the G/T are used.

For low income minority children the reverse is true. Their experiences and language abilities differ markedly from the standards applied in the schools (Stallings, 1976). McKenzie (1986) raised the concern that school districts tend to operationalize definitions of giftedness which work to the advantage of the already advantaged.

Cohen (1988) pointed out that many minority language children have special talents that are valued within their own cultures. Unfortunately, these talents are often not recognized since they are generally masked by culturally and linguistically diverse behaviors (Bermúdez & Rakow, in press). Individual cultures tend to stress certain intellectual abilities and talents more than others; therefore, giftedness can best be described within the context of a particular culture (Bernal, 1976; Leung, 1981; Torrance, 1973).

Research dealing with G/T minority students suggests that identification criteria be examined to include nontraditional indicators of giftedness which best reflect the needs and characteristics of these youngsters. Torrance (1970), for example, suggested a list of creative positives which he found to exist to high degrees in disadvantaged children. These include the ability to express feelings; the ability to improvise; enjoyment of art, music, dramatics, group learning, and problem solving; expressiveness of body language; and humor. Other data document that culturally different children tend to be innovative problem solvers in their own culture (Bruch, 1972; Torrance, 1978). Brandt (1989) notes that the high problem-solving ability of Hispanics is culturally based due to the increased demands placed on the student in the dominant Anglo culture. By having to construct and negotiate meaning from unfamiliar contexts and circumstances, these culturally and linguistically diverse students generate creative problem-solving strategies which could serve as indicators for giftedness (Bermúdez, Rakow, Márquez, & Sawyer, 1991).

Bernal (1974) studied the characteristics of G/T individuals as perceived by Mexican Americans. He found that characteristics attributed to gifted Mexican American children were of a behavioral nature, instead of the traditional view of intelligence as reflected by IQ scores and other single standardized measures. His data revealed that the Mexican American community did not make a clear distinction between giftedness and talent. Instead, the distinction occurred in the behavior of gifted children as they interacted with an adult at an adult level or

exhibited a distinct style as well as type of intelligence. The results indicated that a gifted Mexican American child, from a community viewpoint should exhibit the following characteristics: (a) have verve and style, (b) show joy in his talents, (c) practice his talents often to the exclusion of friends, (d) be intelligent, (e) use common sense, (f) be inquisitive, (g) not be hesitant, (h) be sensitive, (i) be restless, (j) be responsible, and (k) have social relatability skills. Other research (Bernal, 1974) has indicated that the ability to acquire a second language rapidly is another identifying characteristic of these youngsters.

Among many Hispanics, cultural differences may also produce gifted behaviors that are not included in the traditional mainstream definitions of giftedness. Hispanic children, for example, learn to seek the advice of their family rather than act independently (Perrone & Aleman, 1983). Respect for elders is often valued more than precociousness or independence. The latter two characteristics can be perceived by members from this cultural context as disrespectful; therefore they become unacceptable traits. Similarly, the Mexican American child who respects elders, the law, and authority becomes vulnerable in a school system which values individual competition, initiative, and self-direction (Cohen, 1988) and bases its definition of leadership on competitive rather than cooperative abilities.

G/T Hispanics who are high achievers may be reluctant to set themselves apart from their peers. The family and the community are important, and they will want to achieve for them, although they may be hesitant to show their ability (Nazzaro, 1981). The culturally diverse gifted youngster can feel caught between two mutually exclusive worlds, each demanding a different type of identity. "Educators, be they white or non-white, must understand ethnic identity development to effectively work with these students" (Exum & Colangelo, 1981, p.15). G/T Hispanics who have leadership skills may not be recognized as such because those who are capable are expected to first and foremost help the rest of the family and the community (Nazzaro, 1981).

G/T behaviors that are culture-dependent and considered atypical by mainstream standards need to be systematically integrated into the identification process. Gallagher (1979) has stated that each culture tends to define giftedness in its own image. The definition not only fixes the role of the gifted individual in a certain culture, but it tells us something about the culture itself. Thus, it is important to look at how Hispanics view giftedness in order to establish relevant identification criteria for G/T Hispanic students. One research question guided this study: What are the characteristics that the Hispanic community perceives as important in identifying G/T Hispanic limited English proficient (LEP) students?

## **Methodology**

### **Subjects**

Frequency distributions of subject demographics were calculated by gender, age, education level, language spoken at home, place of birth, and country where the subjects received their education. Eighty-five Hispanic respondents produced the data analyzed in this study. The sample consisted of 24 males and 61 females. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 65; the largest category (35.3%) was of participants between the ages of 26 to 35 years of age. The education level varied from none to graduate professionals, although the majority of the subjects (98.6%) had received some formal education. Sixty-six percent spoke English and Spanish at home, 11% only Spanish, and 23% only English. Most of the respondents (69%) were born in the United States, and 84% received an education in American schools.

### **Dependent Measure**

The exhibit presents the attitudinal survey developed for this study. The identification of relevant issues related to the identification of minority G/T students, particularly Hispanics, found in the existing research literature formed the basis for the questionnaire. The survey is a 45-item opinion inventory. Subjects were asked to respond on a five-point, Likert-type scale which indicated their opinions or perceptions toward the stated issues as: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) No opinion, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly agree. An open-ended question was included to elicit comments beyond those covered by the items. The analysis of this question is beyond the scope of this study.

### **Analysis/Discussion**

A factor analysis was used to determine how the items clustered as well as their relative strength. Table 1 presents the six significant factors identified in the study and the respective proportions of the original variance. Each factor was carefully analyzed according to item content and named according to the construct represented.

*Table 1. Factors to be considered in the identification of G/T Hispanic students.  
n=85*

|                                 | Percent of<br>Variance | Items  |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Classroom Behaviors             | 36.5                   | 10, 11, 15, 17, 23, 26, 30, 31<br>32, 33, 34, 35, 42, 44 |
| Creativity                      | 9.0                    | 18, 19, 22, 36, 37, 38, 39, 43                           |
| Originality                     | 5.1                    | 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 40, 41, 45                           |
| Inquisitiveness                 | 4.5                    | 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13  |
| Communicative Skills            | 4.4                    | 12, 14, 16, 20, 21                                       |
| Non-Academic<br>Characteristics | 3.2                    | 1, 2, 3, 4   |
| Cummulative percent             | 62.7                   |  |

Factor 1 (**Classroom Behaviors**) includes not only achievement but other possible indicators of giftedness such as student interests, self-confidence, classroom communication skills, social interaction, and attitudes towards school. These indicators present teachers with the opportunity to assess children beyond the traditional single score framework.

Factor 2 (**Creativity**) includes an appreciation for problem-solving situations, as well as artistic, musical, and bilingual talents. This factor suggests the possibility that the learner is a doer rather than a passive recipient of learning.

Factor 3 (**Originality**) addresses the student's ability to listen, to tell stories and jokes, to be interested in a variety of things, to see multiple solutions to problems, to see various uses for things, and to feel generally independent from established routines.

Factor 4 (**Inquisitiveness**) focuses on the learner's ability and/or desire to observe, be creative, be curious, be motivated to learn, read, and ask questions.

Factor 5 (**Communicative Skills**) underscores the learner's sense of humor, interpersonal skills, and writing and oral expression.

Factor 6 (**Non-Academic Skills**) includes artistic, athletic, and leadership qualities.

The factors identified follow the categories addressed in the federal definition of giftedness presented at the outset of this study. However, the Hispanic community surveyed did not perceive all of these factors to be equally important in assessing giftedness in a Hispanic youngster. A descriptive analysis of the items in the survey (refer to Exhibit) revealed an emerging profile of the G/T Hispanic student as reported by the community. This profile includes those items that showed agreement from the participants in the study (i.e., a mean score of 4 or higher) (see Table 2).

*Table 2. Emerging profile of G/T Hispanic students.*

| A G/T Hispanic:                            | Factor | Mean | SD   |
|--|--------|------|------|
| • finds many solutions to a problem        | 3      | 4.11 | .94  |
| • likes to try new things                  | 3      | 4.06 | .90  |
| • is good at finding other uses for things | 3      | 4.07 | .84  |
| • is interested in a variety of things     | 3      | 4.08 | 1.01 |
| • is observant                             | 4      | 4.26 | 1.06 |
| • is creative                              | 4      | 4.33 | .92  |
| • is curious                               | 4      | 4.42 | .96  |
| • likes to read                            | 4      | 4.01 | 1.06 |
| • is motivated to learn                    | 4      | 4.41 | .89  |
| • asks questions                           | 4      | 4.02 | 1.10 |

Although research has shown that IQ scores are an inappropriate measure of giftedness in the culturally different student (Markheady, Towne, & Algozinne, 1983; Renzulli, 1970), extensive use of these tests is still seen (Bermudez, Rakow, Marquez, & Sawyer, 1991). Most school districts in the U.S. are identifying students for the G/T programs based on scores derived from standardized tests which measure general intellectual ability and specific academic aptitude. The characteristics which proved to be pivotal for the participants in the study are not included in standardized measures. They are characteristics which fall into the categories of creative and productive thinking and minimize achievement, leadership, and communication abilities. The rest of the items surveyed (see Exhibit) yielded mean scores greater than 2.5 and less than 4, indicating neutral responses to the characteristics featured in each item. Further investigation into these issues is necessary before a final profile of the G/T Hispanic student is determined.

## Summary and Conclusions

As demographics continue to change the face of American public schools, educational changes must be in place to meet the needs of these students. However, these changes are not happening at a fast enough rate to accommodate the individual educational needs of the pluralistic classroom. The problem is compounded by the widespread use of standardized measures, including criteria developed without culturally relevant information. In general, screening and identification procedures rely on norms that exclude G/T minority learners (Bermudez, et al., 1991).

Since patterns of intellectual abilities and learning styles are culturally unique (Bernal, 1981), educators and parents must become cognizant of these differences to ensure that students are not misdiagnosed. The present study suggests ten indicators of giftedness which need to be taken into account in assessing the potential giftedness of Hispanic students. Expanding the database can eventually lead to the development of a student profile to be used as the basis for relevant criteria for the identification, placement, and instruction of these students.

While the total number of public school students decreases across the nation, the number of Hispanics continues to escalate. It has been estimated that by the year 2000, schools will see an increase of 35% in the Hispanic student population (Oxford-Carpenter, Pol, Lopez, Stupp, Gendell, & Peng, 1984). In addition, there are approximately 7.9 million school-aged youngsters whose home language is other than English (Waggoner, 1986). Despite the growing number of school-age limited English proficient (LEP) students, services to these students remain inadequate. Students who have been classified as LEP are generally subjected to inadequate assessment and placement practices which are responsible for continued underrepresentation in programs for the gifted and talented (LaFontaine, 1987). Identification criteria should be developed vis a vis community perceptions of the culturally diverse youngsters.

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*Exhibit*

Dear Colleague: Please take a few minutes of your time to complete this questionnaire. Your valuable input will serve as a contribution to improve the education and assessment of Gifted Hispanic LEPs.

**Survey on Characteristics of  
Gifted and Talented Hispanic Students**

Occupation:

Place of Birth:

If foreign born, length of residence in US:

Gender  male  female

Please check the most appropriate answer:

- Age group:
- 18-25
  - 26-35
  - 36-45
  - 46-55
  - 56-65
  - over 65

- Ethnic background:
- White (non-Hispanic)
  - Black
  - Asian
  - Hispanic

If you are Hispanic, specify country of ancestry:

Highest level of education completed:

- None
- Elementary
- Middle School
- Secondary
- Technical School
- Junior College
- University
- Graduate/Professional

Were you educated in the US?  yes  no

If you were not educated in the US specify country:

Language(s) spoken at home:

Number of people who live in household:

What makes a gifted person unique?

Instructions: Rate the items below using the following scale:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = No opinion
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

**A Gifted Hispanic. . .**

|  | 1                        | 2                        | 3                        | 4                        | 5                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. is artistically talented                  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. is a good athlete                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. is musically talented                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. possesses leadership qualities            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. is observant                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. is creative                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. is curious                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. likes to read                             | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. is motivated to learn                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. is a good student                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. shows interest primarily in one area     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. is a good writer                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. asks questions                           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. is friendly                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. is self-confident                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. has a good sense of humor                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. has a large vocabulary                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. likes to do math problems                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. likes to do science experiments          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. speaks English well                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. speaks Spanish well                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22. speaks more than one language            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 23. is polite                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 24. is independent                           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25. is a good listener                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 26. works well with others                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 27. finds many solutions to a problem        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 28. likes to try new things                  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 29. is good at finding other uses for things | <input type="checkbox"/> |

|  | 1                        | 2                        | 3                        | 4                        | 5                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 30. expresses himself/herself well orally          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31. expresses himself/herself well in written form | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 32. is good at explaining things                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 33. likes school                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 34. does well in school                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 35. likes to study                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 36. can sing                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 37. can play a musical instrument                  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 38. can draw                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 39. can paint                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 40. is a good story teller                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 41. is a good joke teller                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 42. is good at reciting poetry                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 43. is a good dancer                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 44. is obedient                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 45. is interested in a variety of things           | <input type="checkbox"/> |