IMPROVING DISPROPORTIONALITY OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN HIGHLY CAPABLE PROGRAMS (HCP)

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INTRODUCTION

In the literature on gifted programs, two groups emerge as typically under-represented. The first group is comprised of children from ethnic minority groups and children of poverty. The second includes underachievers: gifted females in advanced science and mathematics courses, and gifted students with handicapping conditions. (Dorn, 2009). In its 2013 report to the Legislature, the State reported the under-representation of minority students enrolled in HCP within the State compared to their proportion of enrollment Statewide. (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), 2013). Comparatively, White student's State enrollment and HCP enrollment percentages are over-represented (Table 1).

Table 1: Students in Highly Capable Programs in Washington State by Race/Ethnicity, 2011-12

Student Group	% of State Enrollment	% of HCP Enrollment
Alaskan Native/American Indian	1.6%	0.9%
Asian or Pacific Islander	8.0	14.8
Black	4.6	3.7
Hispanic	19.6	9.6
Multiracial	6.1	4.9
White	60.2	65.2

Source: Highly Capable Students Report, 2013 (OSPI)

The underlying causes for under-representation of students of color in gifted programs lie in the processes and procedures used to identify gifted students, in issues of grouping, in the curriculum and instruction of gifted programs that students encounter before being identified as gifted, and in school programs that prepare children from minority groups and poverty during the early years of school. (Castellano, 2004; Ford, Grantham, & Moore, 2004). Federal efforts to

use test scores to highlight and improve performance among minority students have not increased their representation in HCP. Stereotypes and misconceptions also limit opportunity for Culturally, Linguistically, and Ethnically Diverse (CLED) students to show their abilities. Most gifted programs serve students who are white, middle class, and easily identified by objective means such as standardized tests. (Boutelle, 2008). In contrast, students of color (with the exception of Asian students) are more likely to be placed in special education programs. (Robertson, et al, 1994).

The inability to identify gifted students in underrepresented groups exposes our inability to nurture, motivate, and counsel innate intelligence in all students. We need to examine the way educators view giftedness and provide teachers with insights and strategies that reveal the many faces of giftedness in their students, including those from populations that are underrepresented. (Cline & Schwartz, 1999). We also need to look at progressive policies and procedures that meet the needs of the underrepresented student. Helping teachers develop culturally relevant instructional pedagogy and curriculum is essential to provide broader acknowledgement of giftedness.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before the 1950's, schools were considered "separate and equal," and Jim Crow laws mandated the separation of races in public places. Federal and State systematic educational deprivation and oppression of African Americans was based on the country's entrenchment in slave culture and the associated belief in scientific theories identifying race as the source of intellectual ability. The 1954, the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision provided leverage to end segregation in schools. This led to two outcomes in the 1960s for students of low socioeconomic background: (1) voluntary and mandatory school desegregation, and (2) two new laws – Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Emergency School Assistance Act. While well intentioned, these sudden changes unintentionally created negative social and cultural bias against students of color. For the next decade, the system was one of mediocre education and continued separate and unequal choices for

ethnically diverse students. By the 1990s, cultural acceptance of the value of diverse students had become more palatable. However, Gagné (2000) noted that some students with well above average natural abilities do not translate their gifts into observable talents, and they become academic underachievers.

The proportions of African American and Hispanic students in the HCP for the Collins School District[1] are similar to national and State data, i.e., they are under-represented among the general elementary student population in the district. Few African American and Hispanic students are recommended, identified, and/or encouraged to pursue application to the program's assessment process, and fewer are able to score at the 97th percentile on qualifying standardized tests (Cognitive Abilities Test) that serve as gatekeeper for the program's enrollment. While these tests capture some aspects of what is currently considered "giftedness," they are not particularly good measures of others. Together with the current recruitment and selection process, the tests contribute to the reality that there are proportionately far fewer African American and Hispanic students in the HCPs.

DEFINITION OF "HIGHLY CAPABLE" AS AN ANCHOR FOR LEADERSHIP WORK

Defining "giftedness" is an elusive process. Existing definitions display a range of contexts and meanings regarding academic attitude. Many of these definitions are closer to definitions of intelligence than giftedness. Some definitions consider three aspects of giftedness (Sternberg, 1991), while others consider many more (Guilford, 1967). Some endorse a single overall "g" factor and others believe in multiple intelligences (Terman, 1916; Gardner, 1993). There are multiple aspects of gifted programming that must be modified in order to succeed in identifying and providing successful services to students not traditionally included in gifted programs. Piechowski and Colangelo (1984) stated:

> Many authors have addressed the question of the nature of giftedness and talent only to discover that many factors, components, traits, facets, and potentialities are not captured by tests in use...attitudinal changes are

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[1] A pseudonym for a school district located in the Pacific Northwest.

among the first paradigms to be addressed. Baldwin (1984) discussed some assumptions about the gifted student:

- Giftedness expressed in one dimension is just as important as giftedness expressed in another.
- Giftedness can be expressed through a variety of behaviors.
- Giftedness in any area can be a clue to the presence of potential giftedness in another area, or a catalyst for the development of giftedness in another area.
- Carefully planned subjective assessment techniques can be used effectively in combination with objective assessment techniques.
- All populations have gifted children who exhibit behaviors that are indicative of giftedness.
- Behaviors classified as gifted should be above and beyond the average of a broad spectrum of individuals. (p.3)

Definitions may vary in how broad and multi-faceted they are and in the ways they are translated into practices of identification and programming (Callahan, Tomlinson, & Pizzat, 1994; Frasier & Passow, 1996). A successful program has clear definitions, expectations, and standards that execute its primary goal.

In 2009, Washington's OSPI defined a highly capable learner as "a student who has been assessed to have superior intellectual ability as demonstrated by *one or more* of . . . multiple criteria" (Garland, 2009, page 5). The multiple criteria include cognitive ability, specific academic achievement in a specified content area, and exceptional creativity. Table 2 describes OSPI's three overarching highly capable definitions.

Table 2: Multiple Criteria for Determining Superior Intellectual Ability (OSPI)

Cognitive ability	"Complete range of intellectual functions referred to as intellect, intelligence, or mental abilities, and includ[ing] such psychological concepts as thinking, abstract reasoning, problem solving, verbal comprehension, and numerical facility"
Specific academic achievement	"Obtained results on an achievement test appropriate to discriminate academic performance at high levels of achievement in one or more of the following content areas:" reading, mathematics, social studies, language arts or science"
Exceptional creativity	"Demonstration of unique or outstanding creative products and/or the demonstration of unusual problem solving ability or other learning characteristics which indicate to teachers, parents, or classmates that the student has the intellectual potential to perform academically at a level significantly higher than the norm for chronological grade level."

On the national level, giftedness has been broadly defined. The U. S. Department of Education defines giftedness in the following way (Hearne & Maurer, 2000):

> Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and or potential ability in any of the following areas singly or in combination:

- General intellectual ability
- Specific academic aptitude
- Creative or productive thinking
- Leadership ability
- Visual and performing arts
- Psychomotor ability

Locally, the Collins School District, in its HCP description, has acknowledged the U.S. Department of Education's broad definition in its HCP description:

> There is a continuum and range of student needs and learning styles. Included in this range are those students who have special needs created by their depth of understanding and insight, advanced academic skills, rapid rate of learning, aptitude for higher levels of thinking, and capacity for creative thinking.

> Programs for the highly capable students will address these special needs by ensuring the acquisition of basic skills, developing a differentiated curriculum and providing specialized learning opportunities. Teachers will provide a stimulating classroom environment and engage students in high level thinking and productive learning experiences that appropriately challenge each student.

Persson (2012) argues we must be culturally sensitive in our definitions of giftedness and there may be a problem of cultural blindness in certain scientific circles, both in how the construct of giftedness has been developed and in the selection of methods used to study it. Persson continues, suggesting that generalizations from gifted research are distorted due to socio-cultural bias and application of ethnocentric theories of giftedness. Persson's concept of "cultural distance" is useful when comparing the applicability of research findings between countries. Persson considers the United States' lens on gifted research "culture-blind" and argues we should be cautious about indiscriminately imposing theories of giftedness on other cultures. He advises "social science cannot remain credible unless all scholars re-evaluate their role and their work in the light of cultural variation." Ideas about cultural dominance espoused by Persson are thought provoking and worthy of consideration; yet, what remains unclear is how effectively these can inform day-to-day educational practice.

SOURCES OF DISPROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN HIGHLY CAPABLE PROGRAMS

As stated earlier, children from culturally/linguistically diverse and/or economically disadvantaged families and children with disabilities have been dramatically underrepresented in programs for gifted students (Castellano, 2003; National Research Council, 2002).

The continuously low participation of African American and Hispanic students in HCPs could be grounded in part by deficit thinking and institutionalized through recruitment and retention barriers, limited access and opportunity, and testing and assessment issues. Since giftedness is often operationalized as *outstanding academic achievement* as measured by standardized tests, and, implicitly, achievement in English, students from economically impoverished backgrounds and those with limited English proficiency may have greater difficulty demonstrating such achievement (Kitano, 2003). For example, Hispanic and Navajo students' characteristic cultural values include being collaborative rather than competitive, and they accomplish more and worked better in small groups than working individually. Traditional behaviors attributed to academic giftedness are "high grades, high scores on standardized achievement and aptitude tests, and strong classroom performance" (Briggs, et al., 2008, p. 132). Yet Briggs et al. noted that racial and cultural customs influence the manifestations of advanced behaviors not comparable to the norm, often causing the misidentification of culturally diverse students. Continued under-representation of underserved student populations in gifted programs will persist unless a conceptual and procedural shift occurs among educators and other stakeholders in the nomination and identification procedures (Callahan & McIntire, 1994; Van Tassel-Baska, 2007).

At present, standards for determining giftedness are based on definitions of intellect and patterns that often misclassify and segregate the underrepresented student, contributing to the inequity of opportunity, with horrifying consequences for diverse cultural groups. Public schools have the challenging practice of grouping and identifying students for purposes of program selection. In such situations, whether intentionally or not, teachers may be the conduits of identification bias. Research indicates that ethnic groups with low socio-economic backgrounds are at a disadvantage for appropriate

academic placement. Abell and Lennex (1999) concluded that teachers lacking training were unable to identify gifted *disadvantaged* students compared to their more economically affluent peers, thus, creating additional barriers preventing students of color from being identified. Borland (2004) mentions that gifted education could not be considered the primary catalyst for the achievement gap among a diverse student population; it is the moral and political responsibility of leaders to embrace the matter of the underrepresentation of blacks and Hispanics in highly capable programs.

A fundamental issue crippling HCPs, is the absence of an appropriate identification and selection process that recognizes high academic intelligences in culturally diverse students. There are several factors that contribute to this pattern. Traditionally, a single high IQ score on an aptitude and/or achievement test is the sole criterion guaranteeing selection. This "restricted" definition of giftedness limits the number of performance areas that must be met in order to identify a student as gifted (Renzulli, 1978). Tests may be biased when they systematically place a minority group at a disadvantage in relation to the majority group. Consequently, minority group scores continue to be significantly lower than other groups, thus increasing opportunities for misconceptions about diverse cultural intelligence.

MOVING TOWARD CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND EQUITY IN HIGHLY CAPABLE PROGRAMS

Passow and Fraiser (1996) recommend that a new paradigm of identification be adopted, which reflects different ways in which students display giftedness. They suggest that varied and authentic assessments are more successful in identifying students in diverse populations. They further propose that multiple criteria be used, including nontraditional measures such as observing students interacting with a variety of learning opportunities. Areas of the selection process to be broadened include criteria that better represent a more divergent manner by which to measure the cultural cognition of the diverse student population—e.g., tests of creativity, nominations

by parents and teachers, portfolios, student performance and/or a combination of these options.

The term "culturally responsive" has numerous meanings and interpretations. At its core, it means that teachers work proactively and assertively to understand, respect, and meet needs of students from cultural backgrounds that are different from their own. Culturally responsive or culturally relevant teaching makes a concerted effort to infuse the principles of cultural representation into instructional and curriculum practices to facilitate and support the achievement of the variety of students. To be culturally responsive, teachers must understand their own biases and assumptions, learn about the cultural perspectives of others, and use strategies responsive to those varying cultural perspectives. (Hans and Thomas, 2010).

Research outlines numerous ways that teachers can develop their cultural competence, how curriculum of these programs can become more rigorous, and that teachers in these programs can be better supported through staff development and other means. Mason (1993) places cultural competence on levels, noting that individuals and organizations can range from being culturally competent to being culturally destructive:

- *Competence* - Acceptance and respect of cultural differences, continued self-assessment, attention to dynamics of cultural differences, and adoption of cultural relevant service models.

- *Pre-Competence* - Individuals and organizations move toward acknowledging cultural differences and making documented efforts to improve.

- *Blindness* - The system of organization provides services with the expressed intent on being unbiased. They function as if culture makes no difference and all people are the same.

- *Incapacity* - The system or agency does not intentionally seek to be culturally assaultive and lacks the skills/resources to work effectively/responsively with culturally differently individual/groups.

- *Cultural Destructiveness* - Attitudes, policies and practices negatively affect diverse individuals and groups. (Mason, 1983).

As classrooms become more culturally diverse, teachers must deliver more differentiated instruction for ethnically diverse learners. Teacher expectations, recognition of different learning styles, perceptions of intelligence, and a culturally responsive pedagogy make the difference in providing a culturally responsive environment. Conversely, "teachers inadequate knowledge of cultural competence as it relates to diverse minority student population produces a lack of effective pedagogy for students and their families" (Correa, Blames-Reyes, & Rapport, 1996). Contributing factors include pre-teacher programs and professional development supports that do not sufficiently prepare teachers to instruct and support students from diverse backgrounds.

The teacher's ability to identify highly capable students is as important as their pedagogical skill and expectations. The distinctiveness of the gifted student's needs cannot be easily quantified. Generalizations can be made about how they synthesize ideas and acquire basic facts easily and with great breath in comparison to their counterparts. A flexible and non-traditional curriculum would provide for optimum growth of exploration of ideas and abstract concepts (Berger, 2014).

The identification process would also benefit from identifying strength-based protocols and effective professional development. Cultural responsiveness includes "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Professional development could provide the type of classroom instructional support necessary for ethnically diverse students represented in HCPs.

The "deficit paradigm" offers a perspective about low achievement amongst minority students. The paradigm assumes that intellectual and temperamental differences among racial groups are innate. This perspective attributes the achievement gap to minority students and their families who have cultural practices, values, and characteristics that are deficient for academic achievement (Lewis et al., 2008; Ford, et al., 2002). If educators assume that giftedness is simply an innate attribute and students of color are unlikely to possess it, then it is irrelevant to pay attention to matters such as student

motivation, scaffolding of rigorous curriculum, differentiation of instruction and curriculum, nurturing academic prowess, and cultural relevant pedagogy as essential elements to the processes of recognition and identification of students of color. Paying no attention to improving the cultural responsiveness of instruction will mean that instruction will remain culturally unresponsive, likely resulting in detrimental effects on students who are, or are assumed to be, outside the cultural mainstream.

COLLINS' APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

An effective and systematic approach to professional development informs teachers' practices and instructional implementation, leading to increased student achievement. The Collins School District serves a very diverse area and is changing its approach to professional development to see if it has an impact on identification of HCP-eligible students of color.

On its Professional Development website page, the district indicates various categories of continued learning opportunities for teachers. Categories include assessment, education reform general interest, literacy, special needs, teaching & learning, teacher leadership, and technology. A few examples of the literary resources listed in the Teaching & Learning section address matters that might help teachers learn better ways of working with culturally diverse groups of students:

- *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne)
- *Building Academic Vocabulary* (Marzano & Pickering)
- *Co-Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom: Successful Collaboration, Lesson Design, and Classroom Management* (Fattig & Taylor)
- *Educating African American Males: Voices from the Field* (Fashola)
- *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (Delpit)
- *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About it* (Jensen)
- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (Tatum)

On the surface, the district's resources appear to be substantial and varied. However, it is unclear what the district provides in terms of systematic and ongoing teacher development for current and incoming teachers, and whether it expects teachers to attend trainings and derive culturally relevant curriculum inspiration from them. A Program Specialist leads job-embedded professional development in schools with HCPs and supports HCP teachers. The specialist addresses teachers' professional development needs and may assist with planning, teacher modeling or student work analysis. But the intentionality of culturally relevant professional training for teachers and principals is still lacking.

THE LEADERSHIP WORK AHEAD

The issue of disproportionality in HCPs is ultimately a leadership problem. Leaders at three levels of the system – the superintendent and school board; central office leadership; and school principals and teacher leaders – will need to take action to find new ways to identify more students of color for HCPs within the district. Table 4, below, represents a sample action plan the district could follow to address the issue of disproportionality of students of color in HCPs.

There are areas where improvement is both important and possible in Collins' approach to serving talented students of color. Educational leaders in academically successful and demographically diverse districts like Collins recognize that the achievement gap is perpetuated by multiple systemic challenges necessitating a varied approach that includes training educators to understand the cultural differences of the students they teach. (Rothman, 2001). But reducing barriers and access gaps among students of color will also require a new look at curriculum adaptation, support for culturally responsive pedagogy, and more inclusive assessment criteria. When district leaders carry out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district will be positively affected. (Waters and Marazano, 2006).

Table 4: Kent School District 3 Year Highly Capable Strategic Plan and Goals

Goal: Implement a three Year Strategic Plan to increase access opportunities for students of color in Kent School District's Highly Capable Program.	
Action Steps	Develop 3 Year Highly Capable Strategic Plan and Goals
Person(s) Responsible	Superintendent and Board of Directors
Resources	Kent's End of Year and OSPI HC Student of Color Enrollment Data 2009-2014 HC Research Based Evidence on the Success Student of Color, i.e. Assessment Criteria Research related to other districts successful
Timeline for Completion and Implementation	Superintendent and Board of Directors work group June – August 2015 August In-service District Meeting to Share with Central Office Directors and Principals November, March, June and August
Audience/ Communication	Superintendent, Central Office Directors, Principals
Outcome	Share 3 HC Strategic Plan and Goals Share 1st Year District and Building Responsibility Plan Establish Central Office Directors and Principal Responsibility
Evidence of Action Step	July, 2016 1st Year Analysis of 2016 District HC Data Summary Report

Action Steps	Develop 1st Year District and Building HC Action Plan
Person(s) Responsible	Central Office, Curriculum, PD and HC Director(s)
Resources	3 Year Highly Capable Strategic Plan and Goals Kent's End of Year and OSPI HC Student of Color Enrollment Data 2009-2014 HC Research Based Evidence on the Success Student of Color, i.e. Assessment Criteria
Timeline for Completion and Implementation	November, March, June and August
Audience/ Communication	Central Office, Curriculum, PD, HC Director(s) and Principals
Outcome	Share 1st Year Implemented District and Building Responsibility Plan
Evidence of Action Step	1st Year Analysis of Building 2016 Summary Report

Action Steps	Develop Building Highly Capable Goals and Actions
Person(s) Responsible	Office and Curriculum Directors
Resources	District Strategic Plan and Goals Building Student Data
Timeline for Completion and Implementation	Monthly Meetings August – June

Audience/ Communication	Central Office, Curriculum Directors and Principals
Outcome	Monthly Meetings Establish Monthly Goals
Evidence of Action Step	Monthly Meetings and Data Minutes

Action Steps	Implement ad Build Highly Capable Program Goals
Person(s) Responsible	Building Principals
Resources	Building Student Data Building Feedback forms
Timeline for Completion and Implementation	Monthly Meetings August – June
Audience/ Communication	Building Principal and Classroom Teachers
Outcome	Monthly Meetings Establish Monthly Goals
Evidence of Action Step	Monthly Meetings and Data Minutes

Action Steps	Building Professional Development
Person(s) Responsible	Building Principals and Classroom Teachers
Resources	Building Student Data Building Feedback forms
Timeline for Completion and Implementation	Monthly Meetings August – June
Audience/ Communication	Classroom Teacher
Outcome	Monthly Meetings Establish Monthly Goals
Evidence of Action Step	Monthly Meetings and Data Minutes

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