Abstract: This paper articulates the necessity of improving identification protocols for inclusion of low-socioeconomic gifted Latino students in Gifted and Talented Programs in all levels of education ranging from elementary and continuing on to the college level. Non-verbal tests, observation instruments, grade-to-grade portfolios, performance projects, and extensive interviewing are suggested in lieu of biased standardized tests as identification variables. In addition, teacher professional development opportunities as well as the inclusion of multicultural curriculum will promote an appreciation of Latino culture as well as encourage and include intellectually gifted Hispanic students. Reference to collectivistic societal constructs impacting on positive Latino student engagement is discussed. This article will appeal specifically to those individuals entrusted with recruitment for elementary and secondary Gifted and Talented Programs as well as College Honors Programs. In addition, the notion that the identification of giftedness is culture dependent is of importance to the general public in our endeavor to become a multicultural globalist society.

Key Words: Latino, Gifted and Talented Programs, Underrepresentation

LET US IN: LATINO UNDERREPRESENTATION IN GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMS

Jose is a third grade student who rarely participates in classroom discussions and never volunteers to answer the teacher’s inquiries despite the fact that he usually knows the answers and is perfectly capable of constructing an intelligent commentary. His speech continues to be characterized by a Spanish accent as he has only lived in the United States for six months. Jose’s written work is of excellent quality and when in a small group where other Latino students are included, he is an active participant. Despite his obvious intellectual gifts, his teacher has not recommended him for the Gifted and Talented Program (GT).

A Definition of Gifted and Talented

The Federal government has established the following definition of Gifted and Talented children:

Gifted and talented students are defined as “children and youth who give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities.” (U.S. Department of Education, 1993)

The Value of Gifted and Talented Programs

Gifted and Talented (GT) programs exist to cultivate the developing capacities of our most brilliant and most promising students; to provide them with rich and rigorous opportunities facilitating and encouraging higher level thinking skills, efficacy in problem solving, as well as a means for creative and personal expression. It behooves us as a nation to give these high-end opportunities to as many qualified individuals as possible to benefit the individuals involved as well as to develop all of our nation’s human resources. With this construct in mind, it is discouraging to acknowledge that the proportionality of ethnic minority group students engaging in gifted and talented programs is negligible.

Latinos continue to be underrepresented in Gifted and Talented Education programs, even though their overall enrollment rates have increased over time. Latinos and Blacks are underrepresented in Gifted and Talented programs in comparison to their White counterparts. In 1994, elementary and secondary school population of Hispanics reached 12.7%; however, Latinos accounted for only 6.4% of the gifted and talented student population. (Hispanic Education Fact Sheet, 2008, p.1)

Low socioeconomic students (SES) apparently do not have equitable access to GT programs. In addition, the state expenditure per student in high poverty schools is much lower than in predominantly White schools (Edu-
culation Trust, 2005). Furthermore, teacher excellence as well as certification and monetary recompense were all much less favorable in low income and high minority schools (VanTassel-Baska, 2007).

All ethnic, racial, and gender groups possess proportionate numbers of GT individuals (Valdes, 2003). This fact leads us to the question posited in this paper. Why are Latino students underrepresented in Gifted and Talented Programs?

RESEARCH
Lack of Comprehensive Identification Measures

One of the measures highly used for the identification of GT students are standardized tests. In this arena the Latino student is at a grave disadvantage due to the White middle class bias of said tests (Strip & Hirsch, 2000). Recently identification measures have been devised by Latino educators to address this issue and to give a more fair reading of minority students’ giftedness. The use of these new measures has resulted in an increase in the identification of GT Latino students (Naglieri, 1997). The inclusion of a greater array of variables in the identification process of GT students is a positive strategy for all educators.

Teacher recommendation is another facet implemented in the identification process. Unfortunately, the research implies that teachers are not well versed in what truly constitutes GT behavior and many times misidentify individuals who possess School House giftedness as the only form of giftedness (Castellano, 1998). Educators must be given extensive professional development on giftedness to improve their identification skills. In addition, professional development experiences should also address cultural sensitivity and an understanding of how giftedness might appear in other cultures (Ford & Trotman, 2001).

Cultural Differences

For example, in Latino cultures, it is unseemly for an individual to draw attention to himself. The cultural norm is that one is expected to be humble and not show off one’s competencies. Obviously, therefore, it would be quite unusual for a Latino child to actively demonstrate his or her giftedness in group discussions, debates, and so on. A teacher having had professional development on nuances of Latino ethnicity would seek other avenues as indicators of Latino GT (Lara-Alecio, Irby & Walker, 2007).

Parental nomination is another method utilized to ferret out GT individuals. One can easily imagine a middle class educated parent advocating for her child to receive GT services. It is, however, highly unlikely that a disenfranchised, low SES, uneducated, ethnic minority would have the nerve or the understanding of the opportunity at hand to question authority (Gonzalez, Clarke & Bauerle, 2000). Consequently, it would be more efficacious if the use of liaison individuals such as bilingual-bicultural social workers would endeavor to glean parental input in a more culturally comfortable manner.

I believe that self-identification as well as peer identification are also ineffective strategies for identification of GT Latino students due to the nature and characteristics of their collectivistic culture. The individual is deemed less important than the group; usually the family (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2007). Members of the culture think in terms of what is best for the group and anticipate sacrifices will be made and that one needs to identify with the group first (Shorris, 1992). This importance of the group notion is why it is imperative that Latinos be identified as GT so that their peer groups can be other GT Latinos as well as other GT students at large. In this way, incorporating the cultural proclivity we, as educators, can provide rich and rigorous opportunities for our Latino GT youth.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

In an endeavor to identify GT Latinos, it is of essence to comprehend the worldview of the Latino student. Contrary to our American individualistic culture, Latino collectivistic culture focuses on the group’s needs ahead of the individual. American pedagogical culture, however, now appears to be moving towards the fundamental concept of this Latino construct in the modern notion of a community of learners as well as in our recent conceptualization that it takes a village.

Group Portfolios

The implementation of group portfolios; a collection of examples of individual members’ best work compiled by and decided on by the members of a small group would be representative of the group’s collective efforts. The humility construct would be mitigated by the impulse to advance the collective group’s success. This process would facilitate the teacher’s ability to identify intellectually gifted children within the confines of their cultural proclivities.

Group Performance Projects

The habitual use of group performance projects as evaluative measures as well as a practice of learned skills would be an excellent ploy in the identification process. The creation of murals, skits, songs, raps, group reports, the making of floor games and a plethora of various group endeavors would facilitate a feeling of trust amongst students conducive to the realizing of their best efforts. The teacher would witness the dynamics of the group processes as well as the final outcomes and would glean a deeper and more specific sense of individual students’ gifts and talents.

Small Group Interviews

Conducting informal small group interviews would also promote a comfortable and trusting environment that would produce valuable data reflecting giftedness. The teacher or counselor must be cognizant, however, of Latino conversational style: a process in which individuals complete one another’s sentences or add details as another member is speaking. This conversational style is not considered rude and is very vivacious and entertaining. In such a familiar milieu, one can imagine that Latino GT behavior and commentary would be evident.

Excellent Measures for Latinos

The Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT) was given to 20,000 students who were predominantly White. This measure does not reflect a cultural-bias as students are not engaged in tasks requiring literacy skills. The White and Latino participants did not score a statistically significant difference. This measure shows promise in its ability to identify Latino students. (Naglieri & Ford, 2003).
Another breakthrough for Latino students was implemented by Cooper (2000). Her development of the Classroom Observation Instrument assisted in identifying GT minority students. The checklist is comprised of items that reflect whether a student reveals GT characteristics. Some of the characteristics are the application of original ideas as well as the ability to augment constructs with details and the demonstration of strength in comparison skills. This nonthreatening and subtle application, I believe would glean excellent results for our underrepresented population.

CURRENT GT PROGRAMS FOR LATINO STUDENTS

Project Athena is a federally funded program for high achieving students in language arts. One of its components was dedicated to finding ways of identifying underrepresented populations to participate. The project used two nonverbal measures of intelligence and thereby identified twice as many Title I students as did their respective school districts (Bracken & McCallum, 1998). Verbal and nonverbal scales of the Cognitive Abilities Test as well as the Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test were administered. The use of nonverbal tests is a strategy that allows Latino students to display their intellectual competencies without linguistic and cultural interference (Bracken & McCallum, 1998).

The John Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY) is a program for all students with advanced skills. Recently, however, there has been a focus on finding GT students of low SES. The program employed outreach coordinators specifically to corroborate with teachers in the Los Angeles-area middle schools in selecting and identifying promising minority students to participate in the program. Most assuredly this interaction between middle school practitioners and the outreach participants must have impacted the teachers’ ability to identify minority GT children. There is an endeavor to offer scholarships as well as pay for transportation to allow for individual participation. This opportunity not only offers academic experiences but is the forum for meeting and engaging with peers (Brody, 2005).

SUMMARY

It is now more glaring than ever that there are tremendous achievement gaps between minority groups and their White brethren. A very positive step for all districts is to improve their identification processes for low SES GT Latino individuals and provide them with the rigors of differentiation, student driven projects, advanced classes and acceleration.

In addition, there is a need for extensive professional development to strengthen identification skills of all GT students by classroom teachers. A global perspective and increased sensitivity to cultural nuances must be developed in the professional growth of all teaching personnel including administration to facilitate communication with minority parents and to enhance instruction for all students from grade school to professional endeavors. Our curriculum must endeavor to be more inclusive and multicultural if we are to meet the needs of our ever growing minority ethnic group, Latinos. By the year 2030 Latinos will account for 45% of the growth in population (Day, 2001).

In our haste to meet the linguistic needs of the Latinos, we must not overlook the GT portion of the population (Bernal, 2002). Test bias must be acknowledged (Strip & Hirsch, 2000) and the use of nonverbal measures given greater credence as well as the replacement of standardized tests with culturally sensitive measures (HBGST) as presented in this paper. Furthermore, a greater use of assessment variables such as: portfolios, authentic projects, checklists, and especially interviewing individually or in small groups of Latino peers (Renzulli & Purcell, 1996).

REFERENCES


