

DISCOVERING GIFTED YOUTH IN INNER CITY SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Gifted youth represent an important resource in our society. However, sizeable numbers of gifted youth who attend inner city schools are not identified and provided appropriate programs. In this paper, we discuss guidelines for more effective identification and education of gifted youth in inner city schools. We describe a transition program that provides opportunities for students to express their “emerging” talents. Teachers nominate students who demonstrate potential for giftedness by maintaining passing grades in their classes, having a good record of attendance and no record of serious disciplinary problems. The short term enrichment activities provide us with opportunities to observe gifted urban youth in a variety of intellectual tasks.

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Inner city schools can get a “bum rap” when it comes to their teachers, students and administrators. They are portrayed in movies and the press as “dangerous places” that are incapable of providing quality education for students. In Albany, New York, self-appointed public school critics have argued in the public press that the “achievement gap” can be attributed to the quality of public schools in inner city neighborhoods and the cure for this educational failure is to introduce Charter Schools. The jury is still out on whether Charter Schools will be more effective than other schools in the inner city. Still, critics paint students, teachers and schools in the inner city with the same brush as hopeless failures.

We present an alternative view of students who attend schools in inner city communities. Although much is written about the failures of these students, they are not all cut out of one cloth. Inner city schools include a sizeable number of students who are doing their best to get an education under adverse conditions. A “close look” at these schools reveals the presence of students with “great expectations” and emerging capabilities for demonstrating “gifts and talents”.

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In this paper, we describe “Urban Scholars”, a transition program for potentially gifted students in two middle schools serving inner city neighborhoods in Albany, New York. Both schools had been on the New York State list of schools in need of improvement. Far too often, youth in these schools demonstrate poor work habits and social skills with their teachers which limit their performance in school. Approximately twenty percent of students in these schools are suspended for behavior during the school year. Only one out of three students are “on track” to pass regents exams and graduate high school. We describe the need to develop transitional services that help schools identify potentially gifted students. These services improve skills that are not yet developed and allow for observations of their emerging gifts and talents (Borland & Wright, 1994). The long term goal is to enroll students in classes for the gifted in high school. The immediate goal is placement in transitional services. A student’s “best performance” is used to identify giftedness.

The rationale for the Urban Scholars Program relies on two bodies of research that provide insight into the characteristics of effective schools, particularly those that serve African American youth (Pressley, et al., 2004) and the characteristics of positive learning environments found in effective community organizations (e.g. Heath, 2001; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Larson, 2000). Effective schools have well managed classrooms, strong leaders and high expectations of students. They are safe and orderly, emphasize the importance of learning and evaluate students’ progress frequently (Pressley, et al. 2004). These schools provide frequent feedback on homework and quizzes that include class discussions about the reasons that answers are considered correct or incorrect. For schools serving African American youth in particular, trust is a very important component of student and teacher credibility (Steele, 2003). Feedback that builds teacher trustworthiness sends the message that stereotypes about a student’s group will not limit their success in school. When they receive feedback, their teachers explain that the school maintains high standards and that they can meet these standards. When they take a test, their teachers treat them fairly, provide quality feedback and explain how they can improve their performance.

Positive learning environments for inner city youth do not label them “at-risk,” “deviant,” or “deficient,” ignore their cultural experiences, hold them to low expectations, or attempt to convince them that ethnicity should be the sole criteria used to define their identities (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). These programs provide safety and supervision, promote cultural identification and community involvement, develop social skills, and improve academic achievement (Cosden et. al., 2001). But, they are particularly effective in providing leadership roles for students that increase their involvement in school and community organizations (see Heath, 2001; Larson, 2000).

Positive learning environments resemble science laboratories, art studios or work settings (Heath, 2001). In these settings, members play multiple roles, negotiate goals and task assignments, debate what their final products

will look like and where and when these will be displayed. Although participants may range in age and experience, experts and novices are encouraged to work together to reach common goals. Outsiders are asked to be either resources or judges of their accomplishments. Students in positive learning environments learn to expand their vocabularies and their problem solving strategies.

#### IDENTIFYING GIFTED URBAN YOUTH

Programs for gifted students in the schools have been criticized for employing untested and unverified strategies for measuring giftedness. They have also been criticized for failing to use measures that are sensitive to cultural differences among students (Bonner, 2001; Borland & Wright, 1994; Hilliard, 2003). Although Black students represent 16 percent of public school students, only 8 percent of them are enrolled in gifted programs (Ford & Grantham, 2003). The process of identifying students for gifted programs is, as Tannenbaum (1983) calls it, “an inexact science”. Generally speaking, gifted youth possess or are capable of developing above average abilities, high levels of motivation, and high levels of creativity (Renzulli & Reis, 1997).

The problem of identifying gifted students in inner city middle schools is complicated by the fact that many of these students under perform in school (Ford & Harris, 1994; Steele, 2003). In Albany, NY test scores at the two public middle schools paint a bleak picture of student achievement. Seventy to eighty percent of students have either serious academic deficiencies or are in need of extra help to meet New York State’s Learning Standards in English. In Mathematics, only about one-quarter of students in one school and one-third in the other have met the New York State Learning Standards.

A look at student performance in Albany’s elementary schools tells a different story. No schools are currently on the federally designated list of schools in need of improvement. Several have received national recognition including Arbor Hill Elementary, which sends most of its graduates to Livingston Middle School. In 2003, about twice as many elementary school students ( $n = 363$ ), as compared to middle school students ( $n = 148$ ), passed New York State achievement tests in English. Three times as many elementary school students passed the tests in Mathematics (519 elementary compared to 165 middle school students). In other words, these urban middle schools include a sizeable number of gifted Black and Latino youth who under perform and have emerging capabilities.

Much has been written about an “achievement gap” in public schools. The differences between White and Black students have to do with the impact of schooling on their achievement motivation. Race differences appear early and increase as students go through school (Lee, et al., 1991). Put another way, African American students don’t benefit as much from their school experiences. The longer they stay in school, the more they “fall behind”. When identifying gifted African American students in inner city schools, schools can expect that

many of them will achieve at lower levels than Whites with a similar score. However, the “achievement gap” can be explained as well by the phenomenon of “stereotype threat” as by racial group membership (Helms, 2005).

Black youth underachieve even when they are provided additional resources. Claude Steele (1997; 2003) suggests that the culprit is stigma or the fear that stereotypes about their group will limit their success in school. Their fears are not groundless! Tucker & Herman (2002) report that African American children are disadvantaged by both peer and teacher biases. Several studies suggest that teacher behaviors disproportionately interfere with Black students’ academic performance and that these students report receiving considerably less support for their achievement than their European American counterparts. Still, teacher involvement has a strong direct effect on the academic engagement of low income, African American youth.

Another barrier in identifying gifted urban youth involves the reliance on standardized instruments for screening and selecting participants. Though standardized tests are based on group data, the selection of students who show potential for gifted performance is not. Applying information about a group's performance to predict the performance of individuals in the group is wrought with error (Williamson & Biggs, 1979). With Black youth in particular, their fear of confirming negative stereotypes of their abilities can hinder their performance. When tests are presented as assessments of immutable aptitudes or intelligences, gifted Black youth will often take longer to answer questions, second guess their answers or give up too quickly on difficult questions they are capable of answering. However, when a test is presented as a "culture fair" assessment of competencies that can be improved, these students score higher. Finally, the perceptions that teachers have of African American students in US schools are often a barrier in itself. Du Bois (1903, 1969) pointed out that problems in U.S. schools are frequently attributed to the presence of African American students. Du Bois recounts the experience of being a problem: “To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience.” (p.44)

Gifted Black youth with high aspirations often confront adults who view them as unrealistic and impractical. Malcolm X tells the story of a teacher he told about his interest in becoming a lawyer. Malcolm was one of the top students in the school. The teacher suggested he should be thinking about a career. Though he hadn’t given it much thought, he believed he could be more than a dishwasher. When he told his teacher he wanted to become a lawyer, his teacher looked a little surprised and, with a half-smile, he said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic” (X & Haley, 1964/1973, p. 43). Malcolm's teacher used a common sense way of evaluating his aspirations. The vocational choices of gifted minorities are often evaluated on the basis of their similarity to others in the fields that interest them (Holland, 1979). However, in the case of gifted Black students, they frequently find that there is no obvious norm group for comparison. Today, they may be advised to avoid the “roads less traveled” and opt instead for vocations in entertainment or athletics.

Differences among Black youth can be “invisible” in school settings. If they act in certain ways they can find themselves marginalized by their minority peers because they are “acting White” (Fordam & Ogbu, 1986). Furthermore, the segregation in the country has led to the development of two school subcultures. Black and White subcultures were largely invisible through the walls of the segregated south. Even within desegregated schools, students are often separated by tracking practices (Oakes, 1985). Black and White students do not interact outside of school and know very little about each other. Nor do their parents. As a result, White educators and youth don’t recognize difference among Black students. They may treat them stereotypically or simply ignore them. Ellison described his invisibility in American life: I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand simply because people refuse to see me.” (From The Invisible Man, prologue).

#### IDENTIFICATION FOR TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS IN GIFTED EDUCATION

Knowledge of urban adolescents who grow up in poverty is scanty, fragmented and somewhat confusing (Jessor, 1993; Mickelson, 1990). These youth are optimistic about the benefits of achieving a good education (Crocker & Major, 1989; Voekl, 1996). In turn, they have a strong sense of being able to complete college and achieve their academic goals (Graham, 1994) and their parents value education as much as the parents of White or Asian students (Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992; Stevenson, Chen & Uttal, 1990). In spite of their beliefs on the importance of achieving a good education, African American students spend more time watching TV and less time doing homework. They also report exerting less effort than their White counterparts in school (Ford & Harris, 1994; Ogbu, 2003).

Consequently, it is important to recognize signs of their “emerging talents” (Treffinger & Renzulli, 1986; Renzulli & Reis, 1997). Vygotsky (1978) used the idea of a “zone of proximal development,” to describe a child’s developmental status as including what he or she can do alone (indicating developed skills) and what he or she can do with assistance (indicating emerging skills). This is useful for observing the “emerging talents” of inner city youth. These students can often perform beyond their level of ability with instruction and effort.

Effort is a critical ingredient that makes instruction payoff. The more time students spend on homework, the better they do (Cooper, & Valentine, 2001) and those who learn study skills reap more academic benefits than those who do not (Zimmerman, Greenberg & Weinstein, 1994). Effort is high when students are interested and believe their goals are being met by the activity (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). However, effort for African American students may also depend on whether they trust their teachers to treat them fairly and not stereotype them (Steele, 2003). The adage that African American students

"have to work twice as hard to go half as far in school" gives them reasons for low levels of effort.

#### THE URBAN SCHOLARS PROGRAM

When we started our efforts to develop programs for youth in inner city schools, we were interested in identifying and encouraging potential "youth leaders" to increase their involvement in churches, schools and community organizations. In early conversations with some adults in the community, we were often questioned about whether potential "youth leaders" really existed in the inner cities. These comments led us to heighten our awareness of the naming process as regards youth in the community.

These questions prompted us to argue that a large number of minority students are "at-risk", but are not delinquents, drug dealers, "thugs", "gang bangers" or teen parents. Instead, we considered the majority of youth in the inner city to be "at-risk" because their dreams and aspirations are not understood nor accepted. These "at-risk" students have high aspirations and strong motivation to do well in school. They are "at-risk" of succumbing to negative stereotypes about them, their families and their values (Steele, 1997, 2003).

The Urban Scholars Program was intended for potentially gifted youth in inner city middle schools with an interest in getting a good education and attending college after high school. It exposed students to diverse points of view, allowed them to adopt new roles and responsibilities, and provided opportunities for them to demonstrate their emerging talents. The program also includes opportunities for students to improve academic skills in mathematics and language arts.

Middle school students participated in a series of challenging enrichment workshops that were held on 3 to 6 Saturdays. Instructional teams included College faculty members in Business, Science and the Arts as well as teachers and community experts. Students were provided with information about effective approaches to studying and taking exams. Research on homework generally supports its use in various subjects (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). It can improve memory skills and increase comprehension Middle school students who do their homework outperform those students who do not and, generally, the more time they spend on homework, the better they do (Cooper & Valentine, 2001).

Students are asked to bring their class assignments so that they can receive tutorial assistance from college students in teacher education. Tutors also provided activities to improve language, math and problem solving skills. They challenge students to think in new ways, ask good questions, debate topics and write for a variety of purposes. The goal is to promote their language awareness, develop vocabulary skills, increase their reading fluency and promote higher levels of comprehension. These sessions have utilized

reciprocal reading, reading aloud in small groups or pairs, creative writing, acting and narration.

Tutorial groups are also used as an instructional vehicle for improving math and problem solving skills. In one session, students were challenged to find a "magical proportion" that appears in many different contexts. They were to identify the number after careful measurements, then determine whether changing units (e.g. from inches to centimeters) changed the proportion. They were given hints to measure proportions of their bodies (from head to floor and hip to floor; shoulder to wrist, elbow to wrist). While discovering Phi (1.618), they were practicing their measurement and conversion skills in mathematics.

### DISCOVERING GIFTED YOUTH IN INNER CITY SCHOOLS

Our search for gifted youth in the inner city middle schools primarily relied on observations of their skills in dealing with language and math tasks. What follows is a description of strategies that can provide opportunities for observing their emerging talents. We learned about the emerging competencies and talents of inner city youth when they:

Investigated real issues using methods of scientific inquiry. A Biology seminar asked "How do scientists answer questions?" The scientific method was used to conduct mini experiments on natural selection and evolution. They observed "roly-poly" insects to determine which characteristics might predict their survival in the wild (size, color, time it takes to turn over when on their backs). In their presentations, they explained steps in using the scientific method.

In a Psychology seminar, students were asked, "How do students remember knowledge learned in school?" They learned about experiments in learning and perception and identified strategies they observed for improving memory and reducing anxiety in testing situations.

In an Engineering Seminar, students assembled a robotic car and tested different fuel cells for efficiency and economy. The project provided a way for students to explore possible solutions to common problems in engineering. Participated in "problem based learning" dealing with real situations in their daily lives;

In the Urban Planning seminar, students observed different neighborhoods in the inner city. After they interviewed citizens about their views of neighborhoods and schools, they identified what they liked and disliked. At the conclusion, they prepared reports for a meeting of the city council.

In a Leadership seminar, students were asked to identify situations in their schools that needed to be improved. They talked with students, teachers and parents and presented their recommendations to the Board of Education.

In a Seminar on Financial Markets, students created retirement plans for people in different professions (a doctor, roofer, teacher, professor, mechanic, etc.).

They presented their plans to a financial advisor from a bank and professors in the School of Business.

In an Entrepreneurship Seminar, students created a new business or product that would improve their neighborhoods. They designed a business plan to market their services and they presented their plans to a panel of experts, who selected a team for special recognition.

Created performances to demonstrate skills in the Arts. In a Language seminar, students performed a play in Spanish while learning about acting, set design, and directing. The teachers modified a Spanish play which the students read, identified roles, practiced and performed.

A Dance seminar focused on "doing" and "knowing" hip-hop, reggae, jazz and gospel. They learned about the African, Caribbean, and Latin American roots of these dances and they created poetry to explain the dances that they performed.

In a Music seminar, students worked with a musical composer in a seminar to write and perform an original song. They learned about careers in the music industry and the "real world" challenges of recording a song.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper suggests that educators in the United States are overlooking a pool of gifted inner city youth who need to be identified before they "fall behind" and lose interest in academics. Our efforts searching for gifted inner city youth relied heavily on observations and resembled our early trips fishing for small mouth bass in Canada. At first, we used strategies that had proved to be successful in our past fishing efforts. However, after two or three days, we failed to catch any fish! Then we asked what is different about fishing for bass as compared to pike, blue gill, sunfish or perch.

We found a number of similarities between inner city youth and Small Mouth Bass we had sought. Small mouth bass don't bite on the bait and unabashedly give up when hooked to be brought into the boat. When they are hooked, they sometimes perform wild and acrobatic jumps out of the water then dive for deep cover. These fish also like to "play with the bait", and tease the fisherman who thinks he's caught a fish only to find out that the fish will "spit" the bait out. Gifted inner city students also like to toy with their teachers and test them. They are notorious for avoiding obvious attempts to "hook them" into doing school work that they are not sure has anything to do with their lives. Still, good teachers, like good fishermen, should approach their tasks with an appreciation for individual differences.

Educators will be better able to build programs for gifted inner city youth if they: (1) look for gifted behaviors rather than gifted youth; (2) understand that gifted urban youth may be "invisible" in schools or even labeled as "problems"; (3) be aware that the threat of confirming stereotypic representations of them may impact their performance on tests; (4) use assessments that identify both the developed talents and the emerging talents of

students. Our intention was to create programs that required the use of talents and emerging talents. We also used active approaches to teaching which confirmed their aspirations and helped educators identify their emerging talents. Our students, just like all of us, needed to be reminded that turning their aspirations into accomplishments requires hard work and a lot of effort. Black and White students, as well as their teachers describe Black students as not being as willing as White students to work hard in school. They often take easier routes through school, selecting less challenging and less demanding courses (see Ogbu, 2003). Yet, we should not forget the truism that students who do their homework generally do better than students who do not (see Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Programs for gifted inner city youth need to encourage them to "work hard" on learning knowledge and skills that are not immediately relevant to their lives.

This paper assumes that inner city schools in the United States include a significant number of gifted youth who need to be identified and encouraged to develop their "emerging" talents. They also need supplementary educational services that enhance their math and language competencies. Schools need to pay more attention to the possibilities that these students demonstrate as well as to the actualities of their performance.

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