

# Thoughts on access, differentiation, and implementation of a multicultural curriculum

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**Abstract**

Identification of gifted students from diverse and underserved communities is traditionally low; however, there are ways to expand identification methods in order to make access to gifted education programs more equitable. Creation and implementation of multi-faceted and multi-dimensional assessments as well as tiered access into gifted education programs would allow students from underserved and diverse populations to apply their problem-solving abilities and propensity for creative thinking to their learning. This approach would allow these students the time needed to enhance and refine their academic vocabulary as well as gain greater exposure to environmental activities that they are lacking at home. However, improved identification and placement into gifted education programs represents only half of the issue. Once identified, gifted students from diverse backgrounds require differentiation of curriculum and infusion of their culture in order to fully meet their needs and enhance their path through education. This article provides insight and reflection into the approach used by a teacher of diverse gifted students in an underserved elementary school in Orlando, Florida.

**Keywords**

Advocacy, empathy, equity, gifted education, multicultural curriculum, teaching strategies, underserved populations

Despite best practices and intentions to identify gifted students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, these students continue to be underrepresented in

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gifted education programs. This is often a consequence of misperceptions regarding a student's race or ability, lack of parent awareness of gifted education programs, the need for enhanced teacher training with regard to meeting the needs of minority gifted students, and issues related to assessment and the tools used to identify potentially gifted students (Michael-Chadwell, 2010). There are many possible approaches to help solve this dilemma. First, it is my assertion that assessments for screening and inclusion into gifted programs should be made multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. This would allow students with limited vocabulary, experience with academic language, or lack of exposure to the environment of the dominant culture to express their intelligence and abilities in multiple ways, such as through problem-solving activities, oral communication, artistic expression, or mathematical interpretation. In addition, modified assessments that are representative of a student's cultural notion of what "giftedness" represents could be integrated, perhaps using a tiered assessment approach that allows temporary access into the gifted program that is then re-evaluated once progress toward proficiency in English or academic language is achieved.

This is not unreasonable. Studies have shown that academically and intellectually gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often able to synthesize and use problem-solving skills learned from the navigation of difficult social and environmental situations to complete academic tasks set by the school system with high levels of proficiency (Wallace and Eriksson, 2006). I have encountered many students in my career who I feel are truly gifted because of their depth of intellectual thought across the curriculum as well as their ability to show advanced levels of understanding. Yet, despite their ability, they are unable to gain access to the official gifted program because their lack of worldly experience and their limited environmental stimuli prevent them from having the background knowledge needed to pass the screening test. Therefore, in order to be truly equitable, my belief is that all students—not just ones from linguistically or culturally diverse backgrounds—should be tested based on their universal abilities to think critically, solve problems creatively, learn new material quickly, display leadership qualities, and use reasoning skills to solve the problems and unique situations that are presented to them within the context of their own environment.

However, access and assessment are not the only issues. Identification and placement of underrepresented minorities in gifted and talented programming does not automatically create equitable access, participation, or achievement for diverse students (Lovett, 2011). Therefore, once students are identified, how can teachers of the underserved gifted best meet their needs while preventing them from either resenting or regressing because of their identification? I believe that the answer rests within the teacher. By understanding the personal motivators as well as the struggles faced by the cultural and socioeconomically diverse students in today's classrooms, teachers can be both better prepared and inspired to design projects and learning goals that are supportive of their pupils' different needs. Ultimately, in order to assist with closing the achievement gap between the performance and future promise of advantaged versus disadvantaged gifted students, efforts surrounding the cultivation and implementation of curricula in underserved schools must focus on concern, compassion, courage, commitment, collaboration, and the desire for change (Ford, 2011).

In the United States, there are many laws and rules about the education of gifted students; however, many of the stipulations are mandated yet underfunded. Therefore, it is often up to the individual school to determine how it will best serve its gifted population. Owing to this lack of funding, many schools opt for the “mainstreaming” method, which requires regular classroom teachers to educate gifted students and provide them with the extra support they need within the regular education setting. This can be a challenge for two reasons. First, the teacher may not be familiar with the specific needs of the gifted population because many undergraduate teacher preparation programs in the United States do not contain pertinent training in the needs of potentially gifted students; furthermore, an official gifted endorsement is not a requirement to teach students who are identified as gifted. Second, given the current nature of assessment-driven curricula in the United States, teachers are often hyperfocused on the needs of their struggling students because their jobs, as well as the reputation of the school itself, are often dependent on how well these low-performing students perform and improve on state-administered assessments. Thankfully, I have been able to overcome these common obstacles in multiple ways. First and foremost, I am a product of the gifted education system. Therefore, I am fully aware of the needs of the gifted students I serve and also have deep empathy for them; consequently, I chose to participate in a Master’s degree program that placed a heavy emphasis on the intellectual and affective needs of the gifted student. Last, as a teacher in a small charter school, I am blessed with small class sizes that allow me to focus equally on my struggling students as well as monitor the continued growth and performance of my most adept students.

Most of my gifted students are economically poor but intellectually bright, but basic necessities such as sleep and space to complete assignments are often completely beyond their control. Therefore, without time allotment or access to resources within the context of the school day, many of our gifted students’ academic and emotional growth would stall or begin to revert into periods of underachievement. Of the 149 students served by my school, 97% are African American, 2% are Hispanic, and 1% are Caucasian, with 94% of students receiving free and subsidized lunch due to poverty. Additionally, fewer than 10 are English language learners and the vast majority of students do not identify with cultures or heritage outside of the dominant American culture, with a minority identifying as African, Caribbean, or Puerto Rican. Given this analysis, the needs of the gifted students served by my school have less to do with culture than with socioeconomic status—although African American heritage does play a key role in our school’s overall mission. Therefore, when planning projects and assignments for my gifted students, this focus is forefront in my mind.

The lack of a truly multi-cultural classroom is believed to affect the achievement of gifted minority children, affecting students’ sense of belonging and validation as scholars (Olszewski-Kubilius and Thomson, 2010). Therefore, how can teachers in diverse and urban areas conquer this dilemma? From the onset of my teaching career, I decided to teach in multicultural populations. Consequently, from the very beginning stages of planning my classroom, this thought was paramount. Everything—from the assembly of a multi-lingual, ethnically diverse classroom library to the display of decorations on my walls that represents accomplishments and inspirations from various world cultures—was carefully planned and executed to uplift and embolden my students.

Many of these students are used to being shuffled through the system by schools or teachers who are plagued with students who require intense intervention or behavioral support to simply get from one grade to the next. However, the physical and tangible aspects of the classroom are only half the battle, particularly when gifted students are enrolled or begin to emerge. Construction and implementation of curricula that is both motivating and relevant to diverse students from urban backgrounds is also crucial and requires creativity on the part of the teacher, especially since the basic outline is often prepared without strong emphasis on either the gifted or underserved student. Although teachers of the gifted should still ensure that maximum achievement is made in basic skill acquisition, it is also imperative that lessons and projects are developed that take the content beyond the prescribed curriculum, expose students to multiple types of creative thinking, are student selected, develop thinking skills, and promote both self-awareness and self-understanding (Davis, 2004). Consequently, it is up to the teacher of the gifted to modify the curriculum by designing activities for underserved gifted students that recognize and affirm them. Teachers need to recognize students' strengths as well as identify, understand, and compensate for any weaknesses due to lack of rich primary experiences or lack of access due to economic restraints (Olszewski-Kubilius and Thomson, 2010). I have found that the best way to accomplish this goal is to simply take the time to know and understand each student as an individual. It is amazing how much you can learn about the interests, strengths, weaknesses, and desires of a student by simply sitting and talking with him or her at lunch or conversing with them during recess. By taking this approach to better understand each of my student's goals and desires individually, I have been able to tailor their learning experiences in ways that have been significantly motivating for them and immensely satisfying for me.

As a school in an underserved environment, where identification of gifted students is traditionally low, we are blessed to have over 10% of our population officially identified, staffed, and actively supported with gifted education services. While this is a wonderful statistic to be represented in a disadvantaged community, we have had to consider a few factors. First, our students often do not have the financial means to purchase supplies or technology in order to complete their assignments and independent study projects at home. Therefore, we have had to find sponsors to help us provide materials for students to use in class or at home, as well as provide suitable technology for student research and investigations. Additionally, because our school is almost entirely African American, we have infused many projects and curricula that support and empower our students' heritage, including support of a school-wide character education across the curriculum through infusion of West African Adinkra symbols, which are icons originally developed in Ghana to express social, cultural, and historical ideas (Danzy, 2009); access to African Ubuntu drumming classes as an extracurricular activity; development of projects centered on the cultural, scientific, and technological contributions of historic African Americans; and integration of African literature in order to convey universal beliefs and alternative points of view to the standard, dominant culture curriculum. I approach this in two ways: individual projects based on the specific needs and desires of my students and projects in which the entire class can take part, thus allowing the gifted students to take both leadership and supporting roles throughout the year.

For example, over the last two years I had the pleasure of teaching an exceptionally gifted student who had a strong desire to connect with her African heritage. In addition to attending regular public school, Student A also attended an African culture school every Saturday. The school was founded by her mother and teaches children of African descent about their ancestors and heritage through the study of art, music, proverbs, and literature. A main focus of the African culture school was the Order of Maat, which is an African law of morality that focuses on the following principles: truth, order, balance, justice, and reciprocity—heavy subject matter for a fifth grader! Although all of my students are African American, they do not all identify as African—in fact, most identify more with being American. However, I was intrigued by the concept of Student A being able to explore her cultural heritage and also felt that the main principles she could research would be beneficial to her peers as well. In addition, the fact that her customs and beliefs lent themselves beautifully to the tenets of character education, which is a main focus of mine as well as the overall mission of my school, was a significant bonus. Therefore, I decided to heavily infuse Student A's curriculum with the creation of visual art projects and consistent use of literature that validated her universal beliefs of inner strength and sense of moral justice. Over the course of her two-year tenure, Student A assisted the school and its teachers with the development of units and themes on character traits and also assisted other students with developing their own projects and activities that encouraged positive interaction among peers. Contests and art projects involving themes of perseverance, respect, and responsibility became commonplace and all students in the school were excited to take part in programs that aimed at self-improvement both intellectually and affectively. This process not only empowered Student A to further explore and validate her cultural heritage, but also allowed her to serve in a leadership role for her peers who ultimately looked up to her with immense respect and admiration.

By making the effort to infuse the everyday curricula with culturally rich materials that are relevant to any given group of students, as well as guiding the instructional process with feelings of empathy, support, and encouragement, teachers are able to fulfill not only the role of educator, but also that of cultural translator (Morales, 2010). However, in underserved populations, ethnicity or cultural background is not the only factor to consider, as most students are also economically disadvantaged: some identify more with their low socioeconomic background than they do with their race or ethnicity. Student B, who was with me for both her fourth and fifth grade years, had high intellectual aptitude as well as emotional maturity and depth well beyond her physical age of 10 years. However, given her family's financial situation, Student B was consistently living in and out of homeless shelters and relying on the school food bank for basic nutrition, and often had to rely on the kindness of others in order to attend school field trips and acquire supplies to further her educational endeavors. Since Student B had such a high level of ethical righteousness, she struggled with the fact that she was always on the receiving end of support from the community and was frustrated that she could not give back in a way that felt meaningful to her. Throughout our discussions, I explored ideas with Student B that involved conscientious behavior through service-learning in the hopes that our entire class could develop a project and execute it, so giving back to the community in meaningful and sincere ways. Using a problem-solving approach, I tasked

Student B with researching and presenting the class with local organizations that needed support. She completed this task independently, ultimately identifying seven local organizations that were in need of either financial or physical support. After her excellent digital presentation, the class voted on which organization to support and Student B began developing a plan for raising the money needed to support the charity, eventually deciding to create a school store that would sell inexpensive snacks and supplies to raise money for her cause. In the end, Student B accomplished a dual goal. Not only did she create, stock, and manage a school store that ultimately raised nearly \$200 for her charity, but she also achieved intense inner satisfaction knowing that she was able to give back to the community rather than always be on the receiving end of generosity from others.

While Student B's project involved participation from the entire class in order to be successful, the impetus of the project was for her benefit. However, I have found that it is also possible to develop group projects that can be motivating and intrinsically beneficial for all participants involved. Last year, the rationale behind the creation and implementation of a two-week summer gifted academy stemmed from the idea of allowing diverse gifted students from our community to use their creativity and critical thinking skills to explore ways to revitalize their historic and underserved Orlando neighborhood. To many who live in Orlando, the neighborhood in question is an area of urban blight that is in need of drastic economic overhaul and redevelopment. However, since this community is *home* to these students, the project was intended to give them both a voice in its redevelopment as well as inspiration to act on their goals to help revitalize their historic neighborhood. Throughout the 10-day period, students studied the concepts of urban planning, revitalization, and historic preservation through a combination of guest speakers, field trips, and walking tours. Consequently, the students created their vision of what they wanted their neighborhood to look like. They created a three-dimensional floor model of the entire vicinity, deciding along the way what services and resources would be needed to fulfill their vision. It was amazing to me, and the other teachers involved, how engrossed the students became. To culminate the project, all students participated in presenting their vision of a revitalized neighborhood to local elected officials, key business personnel, and—perhaps most important—family and community members who were truly absorbed and inspired to see the visions created by members of the next generation. In fact, the project was so well received that it has been used by the mayor of Orlando during official city events as a symbol of innovation and need for investment in the underserved areas of our city—an impact that we never expected when the project was developed!

As shown through the deep cultural interests of Student A, the fervent desire of Student B to reach beyond the academic curriculum, and the incredible success of the collective summer gifted academy in creating a vision of the future, the satisfaction of working with underserved gifted students cannot be understated. Working in an urban environment is definitely a challenge, but the impact made on the students when all of their needs and interests are taken into consideration is a powerful motivator. When I chose to leave my first career and become a teacher, I wanted to make the maximum difference to my students. However, I was truly unprepared for the amazing breadth of diversity and varied interests that I would have the pleasure of experiencing with my students along the way.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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## Author biography

**Derek Cavilla** teaches diverse and underserved students at a public charter school in Orlando, Florida. Before entering education, he was a highly successful small business owner for 14 years. He graduated with a Master of Education degree in teacher leadership with a specialization in gifted education from the University of Central Florida in 2013. He is pursuing an EdD in Education, and is committed to studying how to make the educational system more equitable for all of the students served through public education, with a particular focus on gifted students from underserved communities.