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Abstract

This study examined the gifted and talented (GT) curriculum of a suburban school district in a southwestern state through the lens of Lindsey, Robbins, and Terrell's (2009) Culturally Proficient Continuum (CPC) model. The study sought to determine if the district's GT curriculum and program activities supported cultural proficiency, utilized any of the six CPC levels within the curricular and program practices, and examine how using the CPC model to evaluate other GT programs could be used. The primary evaluation sources used for collecting data for this study were: (a) document reviews, (b) inspection of school district external communication and (c) observation of instructional activities within the organization. Findings uncovered by this study revealed the district had practices that were supportive of culturally relevant practices with opportunities for students to learn about diversity and a few of the practices were supportive of multicultural education.

Introduction

In this article, the researchers examined the need for culturally relevant curricula for diverse students after placement in gifted and talented programs. Attention has been given to the issue of the paucity of students of color, who participate in gifted and talented (GT) programs within K-12 public schools, as well as the challenges of admissions and participation requirements for students of color. It is not sufficient to increase numbers without ensuring the curriculum supports students' learning and teachers conduct culturally responsive practices. Anguiano (2003) noted that the identification of culturally diverse gifted and talented students is a complex process, which must not be taken lightly, and this identification is not always done in the most appropriate manner. Perhaps the most significant reason for this underrepresentation is the use of culturally inappropriate assessment instruments and testing procedures.

The goal of increasing the numbers of students of color in GT programs is noble and necessary; however, educators must also address the curriculum and learning activities in gifted and talented programs (GT) earlier. Further, in some school districts, teachers and administrators have addressed this issue and continued to examine ways to ensure that the admission process for students of color in GT programs at all levels are adequate and appropriate. Naglieri and Ford (2015) confirmed controversies surrounding how to equitably identify gifted students properly, and the arguments are quite polemic and entrenched.

The Culturally Proficient Continuum

In this article, the researchers proposed the use of a framework for educational leaders (at the district and building levels) to assist in evaluating the cultural proficiency of the GT curriculum in schools. This framework is built on Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell's (2009) Culturally Proficient Continuum, which has six criteria (levels) for measuring responsiveness to difference. The levels of Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell's (2009) Culturally Proficient Continuum (CPC) are divided into two categories i.e. those levels that are barriers to and those levels that are supportive of cultural proficiency. The lower levels (barriers) from highest to lowest are: (a) cultural destructiveness, (b) cultural incapacity, and (c) cultural blindness. The supportive levels from lowest to highest include: (a) cultural pre-competence, (b) cultural competence, and (c) cultural proficiency.

Cultural destructiveness pertains to practices that remove references to culture in schools. *Cultural incapacity* refers to stereotypical behaviors towards other cultures. *Cultural blindness* pertains to failure to acknowledge the differences of others or treating all cultures from the same standpoint. At the supportive range, *cultural pre-competence* refers to building awareness of cultures. *Cultural competence* supports ensuring the school's values and mission is inclusive of practices that acknowledge other cultures. *Cultural proficiency* moves to the action level where the school engages in socially just practices (Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell, 2009). In this study, we identified common curriculum and program components found in a suburban school district in an urban metropolitan area of a southwestern state for the purpose of examining the use of the Culturally Proficient Continuum model for assessing cultural proficiency as a means of evaluating the cultural relevance of the curriculum in gifted and talented programs.

Literature Review

A growing body of evidence identifies certain socioeconomic, social, cultural, and psychological factors that influence the academic achievement of students of color and influence their disproportionately low numbers in gifted programs. NCES (2015) data reported: Between fall 2013 and fall 2024, the number of White students enrolled in public schools is projected to continue decreasing from 25.2 million to 24.2 million, and White students' share of enrollment is expected to decline to 46 percent. The percentage of students who are White is projected to be less than 50 percent beginning in 2014 and continuing to decline as the enrollments of Hispanic students and Asian/Pacific Islander students increase. The number of Hispanic public school students is projected to increase from 12.5 million in 2013 to 15.5 million in 2024 and to represent 29 percent of total enrollment in 2024. The number of Asian/Pacific Islander students is projected to increase from 2.6 million to 3.0 million between 2013 and 2024, and their enrollment share in 2024 is projected to increase to 6 percent. Although the number of Black students is projected to fluctuate between 7.7 million and 7.9 million during this period, their enrollment share is projected to decrease from 16 to 15 percent (p. 80).

Given future projections such as these, school districts everywhere are challenged to more effectively meet the needs of their gifted and diverse student population, while maintaining high standards (Ford and Harris, 2000). Thus, the literature review we have provided focuses on better understanding why there has been a paucity of minority student representation in gifted and talented programs, which curriculum models are used in culturally responsive gifted and talented programs, and a call for pursuing culturally relevant pedagogy in gifted and talented programs.

The literature investigating the disproportionate number of minorities placed and retained in gifted programs reveals a number of important factors contributing to this phenomenon. Moreover, issues concerning how giftedness is defined (Ford and Grantham, 2003), incongruent selection criteria and assessment tools (Ford and Grantham, 2003; Gould, 1995; Hilliard, 1992), educator bias and attitudes regarding students of color (Ford and Grantham, 2003; Storti, 1999) and educators' lack of cultural competence in preparing diverse gifted students (Ford, 2005; Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008) have all contributed negatively to the identification and retention of students of color in gifted and talented programs.

With regards to curriculum, a number of models reflecting culturally responsive thought have been utilized in gifted education. Ford and Moore's (2004) model of culture focused on an understanding of culture as the first step toward creating culturally responsive classrooms while Baldwin (2002) suggested differentiated curriculum must be inclusive of the histories and significant events of the cultures of students selected or the program. Additionally, Ford and Harris' (2000) multicultural gifted education framework, developed from the theories of Bloom (1956) and Banks and Banks (1993), supported an inclusive, comprehensive perspective, which provided a model for educators to integrate central concepts and principles from both gifted and general education.

In summary, Ford and Harris (2000) reported like all education, gifted education faces critical issues as the nation becomes increasingly diverse and noted in particular, our field struggles with finding solutions to the persistent and pervasive underrepresentation of students of color in gifted education. Research on gifted education has suggested issues surrounding identification strategies (Grantham, Frasier, Roberts & Bridges, 2005), organizational plans for meeting these needs (Ford, Moore & Harmon, 2005), and teaching and curriculum strategies (Baldwin, 2002) have been and continue to be at the forefront of debates concerning best practices regarding culturally diverse students, who are gifted.

Methodology

The methodology of the paper is primarily a literature and document review of the school district's published gifted education documents. The researchers reviewed school district documents, which included an evaluation of the organization's published goals, mission statements, philosophy statements, brochures, and newsletters, as well as information published on the school district's website. Additionally, to obtain information to conduct this study, the researchers communicated directly with the district's coordinator of gifted education, as well as reviewed all published literature.¹ Document analysis was the primary method to examine approaches including clarification and communication from the district's coordinator of gifted instruction. "Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). In this approach, the data are interpreted for meaning.

Research Questions

The research questions which guided the study included: (1) How does the district's GT curriculum and program activities supportive of practices which support cultural proficiency, (2) Which CPC levels are most prevalent in the district's curricular and program practices, and (3) What are the implications of using the CPC levels to evaluate GT programs?

¹ The initial data collection period for this study is Fall 2010. However, a second analysis of Fall 2015 district records remains consistent with the current findings.

For the research study, the researchers first identified common curriculum and program components found in a suburban school district in an urban metropolitan area of a southwestern state. After identifying the curricular activities and components, the practices were rated using the Culturally Proficient Continuum and rationales were provided for our suggestions in developing, enhancing, refining, and/or eliminating current practices. The CPC served as a framework for evaluation, as well as a tool for discussing best practices.

Findings on the Prevalence of Culturally Responsive Practices

Within this particular suburban Southwestern school district, gifted education at the elementary level is not delivered in a pullout program format, where gifted students separately engage in enrichment and supplemental activities apart from regular education students. At the elementary level, classroom teachers, who have had gifted education training, teach gifted students in the respective grade level in a self-contained class. Gifted students are then clustered together with these specially trained teachers and other students can also be present in the classes. Furthermore, gifted students in the district are not placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as is customary in some states. The GT program at the middle and high school grade levels however was based on an area of identification of gifted strengths, which determined the subject area placement by middle and high school areas for placement in advanced classes. The pace of curriculum delivery is then dependent upon the body of students.

Teacher Professional Development and Training

This district does not have a specific model in place for gifted education, but offers professional development sessions on different models. Sample sessions included workshops on the work of Susan Winebrenner and Dr. Sandra Kaplan's *Icons of Depth and Complexity* as examples. Also, there is not a separate curriculum for gifted students. The expectations for skills are taught based on the grade level. Each teacher differentiates curriculum based on the state's Essential Knowledge and Skills (EKS). For example, if students were studying a specific concept, the students who mastered that skill would work with the classroom teacher to delve even further into that activity. For the gifted student, the curriculum is at a more accelerated pace, is more in-depth and students are also involved in research projects.

Diversity and Flexibility in GT Assignments

The subject content that all students take was the same in a specific grade level. However, the pace and depth of understanding and connections are different for gifted students. For example, instead of performing practice exercises, the gifted student can take a test to demonstrate mastery, complete a work project, or conduct independent research. Additionally, the teacher and/or gifted students decide and conceptualize independent, advanced projects so actual assignments vary. Additionally, there is no specific framework or approach for addressing diversity and multicultural education mentioned, written or discussed within the gifted program literature or during conversations with the GT coordinator; however, gifted students' options allow for projects in this area.

One type of GT activity students participated in included affiliation with Destination ImagiNation, a national non-profit organization that conducts activities in teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving. Students participate in afterschool activities to complete challenges and compete in tournaments (Destination ImagiNation, Inc., 2009). Competitions are conducted at the building, district, regional, state, and national levels. Other activities included knowledge

demonstrations where students showcase projects and products related to different topics. Examples of these projects included video games, paint-making, math myths, and a project on how to build hurricane-resistant homes related to research on the effects of Hurricane Ike. This project included demonstrations related to the students' cultural heritages. At one fourth-grade school in the district, students completed a genealogy project. At another school, students created tessellations related to the work of Dutch graphic M. C. (Maurits Cornelis) Escher, who was known for his mathematically inspired woodcuts, lithographs, and mezzotints.

Discussions and Implications

As a whole, the district has practices that are supportive of culturally relevant practices. There are opportunities for students to learn about diversity and some practices are supportive of multicultural education. Although there was not a specific curriculum in place, the current structure can allow for culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum. Teachers of gifted students have the autonomy to engage in activities at the higher supportive levels of CPC. We also found practices where the district is operating at the barrier and supportive levels of CPC. The district is operating to some extent at the barrier level, due to the organizational structure of the district programs and the lack of specificity of a GT curriculum. Also, there is not a formal curriculum in place for GT activities. There is not necessarily a specific multicultural focus or process for facilitating diverse practices, therefore by default, the district would be failing to acknowledge the differences of others, as well as treating all students the same. This premise would align with the melting pot concept, where cultures blend together in lieu of the salad bowl premise, where individual cultures blend with others yet, retain their own flavor i.e. identity. The district could be addressing cultural relevance on a tangential level. In this respect, the district may actually be operating at the culturally blind levels of CPC.

At the supportive level, the district has activities that operate at the cultural pre-competence level. Moreover, because individual teachers and students have opportunities to conduct individual projects, they can design projects that build awareness of diversity and multiculturalism. The activities would only build awareness for those students, who happen to be exposed to certain projects. For example, at the district's GT showcase, there were projects related to students' cultures or social justice-related issues. These activities were only at the awareness level as there was not an engagement focus or socially just action required. The activities are at the understanding levels. Understanding is important to some extent, yet to encourage and support students of color participating in GT programs in the district, additional practices at higher levels of CPC will need to occur.

At the district level, curriculum administrators will need to collect data on the types of activities occurring as well as the frequency. The information would need to be organized by building-level, sub-areas in the district (particularly those with students of color), grade levels across the district, and school range levels (elementary, middle, and high school). Further, schools having practices that meet higher CPC levels should develop a framework and instructional companion of activities. Having detailed information about the projects and programs would provide the district an initial starting point for activities. Teachers of gifted students in the CPC mastery schools would design literature along the different levels. Further, the administrative role is important as a means of building capacity of the teachers to conduct the activities and provide the instructional leadership needed to ensure whole-scale implementation. At the onset of the study, we wanted to identify the appropriateness of using the CPC levels to evaluate GT programs. The model provides a succinct rating system that can be applied to an

overall curriculum, GT programs, and individual activities and projects. The continuum is easy to understand and utilize. Administrators would also be able to take the model and evaluate teachers. Curriculum specialists, leaders, and teachers can use the model to develop scoring tools for the evaluation of the programs and the gifted curriculum.

Conclusion

The use of the Culturally Proficient Continuum model by educational leaders to evaluate gifted programs for cultural proficiency is valuable. In order to promote diverse student participation in GT programs, placement processes will need improvement. In addition, the programs, themselves, must be improved to provide support to these students for sustainability and retention. In sum, the culturally proficient continuum provides a beginning framework for school leaders to use to further these efforts and ensure diverse students have quality curriculum. There are a number of methods to determine if students should be placed in gifted programs i.e. intelligence testing, achievement testing, and advanced performing and arts assessments. However, due to the paucity of students of color in gifted and talented programs, educators should examine current practices, as well as identify ways to increase participation. If the district examines the approaches employed to place students in the gifted program and adopts new evaluation procedures, this strategy could also increase the number of gifted students.

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