

# Identifying Gifted and Talented English Language Learners: A Case Study

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*With the sharp rise in students who are English language learners (ELL), research on identifying and serving the needs of gifted and talented (GT) ELL students offers fertile ground for best practice guidelines. The current study describes GT/ELL identification practices based on an in-depth case study of one diverse school district in the Midwest. School personnel, parents, and students participated in separate semistructured group interviews about their experiences regarding GT/ELL identification. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic content. Additionally, district and state policy documents about GT and ELL identification practices were reviewed. Results highlight the theoretical and practical barriers to identifying GT ELLs effectively. These include possible population challenges, state support, current programming, assessment practices, parental involvement, and staff challenges. Implications for school personnel and recommendations for future research are discussed.*

Although the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs has been acknowledged in the literature for many years (e.g., Frasier, 1997; Maker, 1983; Marland, 1972), serious attention has only recently been drawn to the educational concerns of gifted students whose native language is not English (Bernal, 2002). Students with limited English proficiency are often underserved in gifted programs and overrepresented in special education programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Patton, 1998; Vasquez, 2007). Although it is expected that these students will be represented in gifted program-

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*Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. Vol. 32, No. 3, 2009, pp. 368–393. Copyright ©2009 Prufrock Press Inc., <http://www.prufrock.com>

ming and special education programming at a rate representative of the school-age population, this is not occurring (Ford, 1998; Maker, 1996). Plummer (1995) estimated that culturally and linguistically diverse students are “underrepresented by 30% to 70% in national gifted programs and overrepresented by 40% to 50% in special education programs” (p. 289).

A study by the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) found that some ethnic groups are significantly less likely than their White counterparts to be involved in gifted programming (Resnick & Goodman, 1997). The NELS study provided statistics for Asian, White, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Based on this classification, the Asian, Hispanic, and Native American groups are the most likely to contain students whose native language is not English. The study found that 17.6% of Asian students, 6.7% of Hispanic students, and 2.1% of Native American students were involved in gifted programming, compared with 9% of White students (Resnick & Goodman, 1997). In addition, there has been a significant increase in the rate at which certain ethnic groups have been identified for gifted programming, but this rate shows no sustained rise for Hispanic students over the past 3 decades (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Although some cultural and language ability groups are underrepresented in gifted programming, the benefits of gifted programming have been well documented for all students. Support for gifted programming increased in the 1980s and 1990s in part due to the release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The authors emphasized the need for gifted programming in all school districts, stating, “We must demand the best effort and performance from all students, whether they are gifted or less able, affluent or disadvantaged, whether destined for college, the farm, or industry” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 24). Similarly, the Jacob Javits grants from the Department of Education in the past two decades have aimed at reducing inequality in gifted programming and developing more equitable referral and identification procedures for underrepresented groups. Although the promise and potential of these initiatives is high, in most districts, little change in the presence of English language learners has occurred in gifted programming.

### **Changing Demographics**

Many researchers have examined the educational needs of several special populations of students who are gifted and talented (GT; e.g., students with disabilities, students living in poverty, females, Asian/Pacific Islanders, African Americans and Latinos; see, for example, Ford & Grantham, 2003; Plucker, 1996; Reis, 2003; Saccuzzo, Johnson, & Guertin, 1994). However, the lack of attention on giftedness in underrepresented populations such as English language learners (ELLs) is a critical weakness in the identification literature due to the concomitant rapid increase in the number of ELLs in the United States. In 1979, approximately 1 in 10 school-aged children spoke a language other than English at home; by 2003, the proportion rose to nearly 1 in 5 (9.9 million) children (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Between the 1989–1990 and 2004–2005 school years, ELL enrollment in public schools more than doubled from 2,030,451 students to 5,119,561 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). The largest country of origin of ELLs is Mexico; immigrants from Mexico account for 2.9 million, or one third, of the national increase in ELLs in the U.S. school-age population since 1982 (Camarota, 2001). This phenomenal growth is not limited to certain states in the U.S. Although the Western region of the country has seen the most dramatic growth in students who speak languages other than English in the home (29% of 5–17-year-olds in 1999), even states in the Midwest, which have the lowest proportion of such students (8% in 1999), have experienced tremendous growth in the ELL student population (Kochhar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005).

### **Barriers to Representation in Gifted Programming**

Despite increased awareness of the need to identify more ELLs into gifted programs, this population remains underrepresented in GT programs. Thus, many ELL students are not receiving the educational services necessary. Failure to provide necessary educational services, including the provision of challenging academic work in the native language, may lead to overall underachievement (Castellano & Diaz,

2002). Regrettably, research indicates that educational systems have focused their attention on the weaknesses rather than on the cognitive strengths of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Barkan & Bernal, 1991).

Frequently, due to the inherent language barriers between ELLs and American schools, ELL students have fewer opportunities compared to their native English-speaking peers to be noticed by teachers for behaviors traditionally characteristic in America of gifted and talent students (Aguirre, 2003). Inherently, ELL students' giftedness may manifest in specific ways that are framed within and that emphasize the students' linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. That is, aptitudes and characteristics of talent potential are culturally defined and embedded (Frasier & Passow, 1994; Montgomery, 2001). Identification procedures ought to concentrate on a broader conception of giftedness that includes nontraditional approaches that consider culture (Johnsen, 1999). Therefore, assessment and referral practices should aim at inclusiveness of culturally based characteristics of giftedness (Harris, Rapp, Martinez, & Plucker, 2007).

Gallagher and Coleman (1994) identified two barriers of traditional assessment procedures in identifying ELL students as gifted and talented. First, poor communication often exists between educators who teach gifted and talented students and teachers of other special populations, such as special education and ELL students. This lack of communication reduces opportunities to observe and know children, including ELL children, in multiple educational settings. The opportunity for ELL children to be identified for having exceptional gifts and talents is increased when educators collaborate to bring together information about a child from multiple sources and multiple environmental influences.

Second, the lack of explicit identification policies regarding proper identification of gifted students from underrepresented groups is another barrier to valid and reliable identification procedures for this population (Gallagher & Coleman, 1994). Additional barriers to effective practices for identifying ELL students as gifted and talented cited in the literature include (a) low teacher expectations of minority students (Hernández, Marcelo, & Rochín, 2001); (b) biases in standardized testing (Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995); (c) the noninclusive or lack of cultural relevancy of our definition of

giftedness (McKenzie, 1986); and (d) negative reactions by school personnel toward non-English-speaking students (Soto, 1997).

As stated previously, one barrier to identification may in fact be the people expected to look for gifts and talent among students—their teachers. Teachers often have the responsibility of nominating students for gifted programs. A study by Peterson and Margolin (1997) found that teachers did not refer any students of limited English proficiency for gifted identification. However, research indicates that teachers are more likely to nominate students who cooperate, answer questions correctly, and are punctual, advantageous behaviors in the United States mainstream culture (Ford, 1996). These qualities may not be advantageous or considered expressions of giftedness in other cultures. In addition, teachers are more likely to nominate students who resemble other gifted students with whom they have had contact. According to Cohen (1998), teachers may lack the knowledge and understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive skills of ELLs. Together, the above issues may result in a population of ELL students whose limited English proficiency and cultural differences may disguise their talents to teachers and other school staff (Bermúdez, Rakow, Márquez, Sawyer, & Ryan, 1991).

This article provides an in-depth analysis of one Midwestern school district and its current referral and assessment practices for GT/ELL programming. School personnel, parents, and students participated in separate semistructured group interviews about their experiences regarding GT/ELL identification and programming. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic content. Additionally, district and state documents about GT and ELL identification practices were examined. This research provides an overview of current policies and practices related to GT and ELL programming as well as the theoretical and practical barriers to effectively identifying gifted and talented ELLs in one school district. Results are presented in three broad categories: a description of gifted and talented services in the district as well as specialized practices for the ELL population, a summary of interview and extant data findings, and, lastly, a more in-depth, thematic analysis of the barriers within identification practices in the district studied.

**Table 1**  
**Maple School District Demographics FY 2004–2005**

Ethnicity/Race	District	School 1		School 2	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
White	80.9	480	87.8	104	28.1
Black	9.9	22	4.0	81	21.9
Hispanic	5.7	14	2.6	166	44.9
American Indian	0	0	0	1	0.3
Asian	0.8	4	0.7	0	0
Multiracial	2.6	27	4.9	18	4.9

*Note.* School 1, *n* = 547; School 2, *n* = 370.

## Method

### *Sample*

Maple,<sup>1</sup> with 9,196 students, is a midsized school district in the Midwest. With a population of about 60,000 residents, Maple sits on the outskirts of a large metropolitan area. Two elementary schools, out of a total of 13 in the Maple School district, were included in the case study; Elementary School 1 and 2. School 1 has a small minority population and is similar in composition to other elementary schools in the district, and School 2 has a large ELL population (see Table 1 for the demographic breakdown). Both schools have gifted and talented programs on campus.

### *Interview Procedure*

The interview protocols were developed in English by a monolingual English speaker (with some working knowledge of Spanish) and a bilingual Spanish/English speaker (see Appendix A). The parent and student protocols were translated by the bilingual examiner and compared to the English version by both developers. The translation was completed with an awareness of the Mexican education system, words common in the Mexican language, and an understanding of the cultural conceptions of the questions.

**Table 2**  
**Listing of Participants**

Participants	<i>n</i>
GT Coordinators	2
School Administrators	3
School Psychologist	1
General Education Teachers	9
GT Teachers	3
ESL Teachers	2
ESL Coordinator	1
ELL Students	7
in GT programming	2
not in GT programming	5
Parents of ELL Students in GT Programming	3
Total	<i>N</i> = 31

Open-ended and semistructured interviews were conducted with school staff, students, and parents by two bilingual interviewers over the course of one school day. The participants interviewed included gifted education coordinators ( $n = 2$ ), school administrators ( $n = 3$ ), the school psychologist ( $n = 1$ ), general education teachers ( $n = 9$ ), gifted education teachers ( $n = 3$ ), English as a second language (ESL) teachers ( $n = 2$ ), the ESL coordinator ( $n = 1$ ), ELL students ( $n = 7$ ) and parents of ELL students involved in gifted services ( $n = 3$ ; see Table 2). Two of the ELL student participants attended the GT program and the other five ELL student participants were enrolled in general education.

Potential participants were selected by the director of gifted services for Maple district based on the participants' extensive experience with ELL students, gifted education practices, and state and district gifted policy. While the participants were recruited by Maple, they were not required to participate and thus did so voluntarily. The parent and student interviews were conducted in Spanish by the bilingual examiners. Maple district administrators report that a total of 60–70 people from all of the interview categories were contacted for participation in the research study, resulting in 31 total participants

agreeing to be interviewed. Both interviewers had extensive training and experience with ethnographic interviewing techniques. The four interview sessions lasted 90–120 minutes each.

All interviews were audiotaped. A bilingual person transcribed the interviews into English, and the translated interviews (i.e., parent and child) were reviewed by the bilingual interviewer to assure that the intended meaning was maintained.

### *Coding Procedure*

The interview questions focused on defining the district programs and policies, assessing knowledge of best practice with gifted students (especially pertaining to ELL students), and discovering the drawbacks within the current district model of GT referral and identification with an emphasis on ELL students. Through transcript review, thematic categories were developed through an iterative process of data analysis and discussion between two researchers. Using a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the researchers allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than impose preset coding systems or hypotheses. The researchers individually grouped conceptually similar responses together, and preliminary category labels were developed based on Maple school district's GT/ELL population and programming. Intercoder agreement was calculated as the number of identical categories assigned by the two coders divided by the sum of all categories assigned between those coders. Agreement was found in 80% of cases and was deemed acceptable (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Discussions about discrepancies continued and a final coding system was established.

## **Interview Results**

### *GT Education Identification*

Children in the state where Maple school district is located are identified as gifted within four major categories: superior cognitive ability, specific academic ability, creative thinking ability, and visual or



performing arts ability. A child must score two standard deviations above the mean minus the standard error of measurement on an intelligence test approved by the state in order to be identified with a superior cognitive ability. To be identified with a specific academic ability in a field (mathematics, science, reading, writing, or a combination) the student must perform at or above the 95th percentile on a standardized achievement test approved by the state. A score of one standard deviation above the mean minus the standard error of measurement on an intelligence test in addition to attaining a sufficient score on a test of creative ability identifies a student as having gifted creative thinking ability. Demonstration through performance or exhibition or superior ability in a visual or performing arts area also can identify a student for gifted placement.

In the fall of third, sixth, and ninth grades, all children are given a group screener (administered in English) that assesses cognitive and academic achievement (i.e., the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the Cognitive Ability Test). If a child scores in the 95th percentile on either assessment, he or she is automatically placed in gifted services. If the child scores in the 90th–94th percentile, she is given a second chance to participate in the gifted and talented program through review of the child's schoolwork by teachers and/or parents or through additional assessments. If deemed appropriate, these children are placed in the gifted program as well. Although the children are assessed in the third, sixth, and ninth grades, placement in the gifted program occurs the following year. Students who do not meet the cutoff on the screeners can also become eligible for the gifted program through referral by teachers, parents, self, or other students at any time. Most often, referrals to the gifted program are initiated by the classroom teacher after a child has demonstrated high ability in certain areas. One teacher interviewed in the current study explained the process:

The first time they're looked at is as a whole group, the first time a child is looked at is considered them being screened. So whether it's through the whole group or whether it's an individual look through a referral process or whatever, that's the first process. Now they can be identified but that first

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time they're looked at is screening. Then if we have to do a second process with them that's called an assessment.

### *ELL Identification*

When students register for school at Maple, their parents are required to fill out a Home Language Survey (HLS). The HLS asks questions about their native language, the language that is spoken at home, and their educational experiences. If the student's dominant language is not English, then an ESL Priority Assessment Request is sent to the instructional services department where assessment possibilities are discussed. Most often, the Language Assessment System is given to assess English and native language proficiency. There also is a state assessment that is given to ELL students that is administered annually in grades 3–12 to assess growth in the ESL program. Instruction and intervention is based on their native and English language abilities.

There are about 5,000 students enrolled in the K–12 schools in Maple. About 5% of this population (480 students) are ELLs. Almost all of these students are enrolled in ESL programs. A large portion of the population (44.9%) at School 2 is Latino and about 2.6% of the population at School 1 is Latino. Over the past 10 years, the immigrant population has increased rapidly and has greatly impacted the number of ELL students registered for school (in 1995, there were approximately 20 ELL students). Over 90% of the district's ELL population speaks Spanish as their first language.

### *GT/ELL Identification*

ELL students are given the same screeners as the rest of the school population at grades 3, 5, and 9. However, due to their limited English proficiency, students are given the opportunity to use an interpreter and a Spanish-English dictionary when taking the screener. If the school believes that the child has limited language proficiency in his or her first language as well as limited English proficiency or if the student is performing below her potential, a nonverbal test of ability, the Raven's Test of Progressive Matrices, is administered. If the child scores at or above the 90th percentile on the Raven's, he is automati-

cally referred for gifted education services. Parents are notified about the process in a letter written in their dominant language.

The ELL child also may be referred for services from his or her teacher, parents, or other students. This referral usually occurs when extraordinary work or creativity and/or advanced artistic talents are demonstrated in the classroom. For example, work portfolios often are used to demonstrate ability in certain areas such as art, writing, or problem solving. Maple also reports that when a child learns English at a much faster rate than other children (e.g., the child is able to place together sentences and thoughts that she might not have been exposed to previously), the child is referred to and assessed for inclusion in the gifted and talented program.

### *GT Programming*

In the elementary schools, there are two different types of gifted education programs: pull-out and full-time. The pull-out program is located at both elementary schools and consists of specialized teachers, classes, and programming. This program is run by teachers certified in gifted education. The students in this program are pulled out of their general education class once a day for specialized schoolwork aimed at challenging and fostering creativity and problem-solving skills. If ELLs have been in the country for a minimum of 2 years, they are pulled out of the general education classroom for 45 minutes a day. If a child has been in the country less than 2 years, he also receives an additional 2.5 hours of daily English instruction. The full-time gifted education program consists of a small class and focuses on problem-solving, creativity, and analysis skills. When a student is referred to the full-time program, she remains in the program throughout elementary school. The full-time program is only located at School 1.

The ELL population has increased rapidly in Maple, and the school staff has made it a priority to provide services and assistance to these students when necessary. As it is for all other students, the two gifted education programs are available to ELL students (i.e., the pull-out and full-time programs). Currently, there are two Spanish-speaking teachers in the pull-out program. The school district did not have the actual numbers of ELL students enrolled in the pull-out

program but believed it to be around 10 students. There are currently two ELL students enrolled in the full-time gifted program. ELL students are placed with other gifted students, including English-dominant students.

Maple staff believes that the children should learn from each other and that all children can benefit from a multicultural curriculum and framework. Direct English instruction is not taught during gifted services. However, in the pull-out program, bilingual gifted education teachers translate concepts that are taught into the language that students understand.

### **Interview Themes: Barriers**

The interview questions focused on examining the gifted practices and policies in Maple school district, including the drawbacks to the current district model of GT referral and identification, with an emphasis on ELL student GT identification; thus, coding categories were based on these topics. Thematic categories were developed using a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Seven categories were developed: state support, awareness of possible population challenges, teacher expectations, assessment procedures, current programming, staff efforts, and parental involvement. These categories serve as a framework in which to better understand the barriers of Maple's current GT identification and programming for ELL students.

#### *State Support*

Maple school personnel reported that although the state's Department of Education has provided them with guidelines for the gifted identification process for traditional students, they are concerned because it is difficult for them to know if the gifted services and identification processes for gifted ELL students currently in place represent best practice. One challenge articulated by staff at Maple was keeping up with best practices and legal requirements mandated by the state for gifted education programming. For example, some personnel indicated that they do not know whether student Individual

Education Plans should be required for ELL students in gifted education. Similarly, even though the state gives the district a list of recommended measures for assessing cognitive and academic ability, personnel related that they were not sure which instruments are the most appropriate to use with the ELL population. One teacher (referring to assessing for giftedness and talent within the ELL population) stated that in the state materials there is “no precedent, there’s nothing written, there’s nothing out there, or there’s very little . . . and that frustrates me.”

#### *Awareness of Possible Population Challenges*

There are some challenges that Maple has experienced due to the increase of immigrant ELL children to the district. It is a challenge for Maple to report the exact number of ELLs they currently have in their school system because of the high mobility rate. The ESL coordinator noted that her estimate varies by 20 or 30 students on any given day. Another concern that school system personnel noted was that students often move back and forth to neighboring schools many times throughout the years due to unstable housing. Currently, the school staff is working on developing and managing a database to keep track of mobile students.

Lastly, several teachers commented on the economic hardships of the ELL children and their families. Emphasizing the diverse needs of this population, one teacher noted that “we’re a school that’s 100% free and reduced lunch, so we have a lot of problems . . . and we are comparing these students to students who have been speaking in English since they were born.”

#### *Teacher Expectations*

Maple also has experienced barriers related to teacher expectations of ELL students. The staff reported that some teachers believed that English instruction should be the primary goal and gifted placement should occur only after language mastery. During the past 2 years, the staff has been involved in multiple trainings and in-services dedicated to understanding and providing best practice for ELLs. The staff reported that these trainings have brought a deeper understand-

ing of the needs of this population and increased the expectations of ELL students. However, according to the ESL coordinator, there continues to be resistance to providing services to this population from some staff. The school staff reported that a large percentage of ELLs are held back in kindergarten: “62% of our ESL kindergarten students are being retained. Now my thought is—why? Is it because of a language barrier? Why are they being retained? That seems like such an incredibly huge amount.” One person believed it is because the first-grade teachers “have very little tolerance for ESL students.” Comments relating to general education teachers and their lack of understanding of linguistic, cultural, and immigration issues also were common. One teacher reported that “a change in the mindset of teachers is slowly occurring; used to be that teachers assumed if their English wasn’t good, the kids would never exceed expectations.”

#### *Assessment Procedures*

Teachers, administrators, and the ESL and ELL coordinators demonstrated support for the current *method* of identification; they mostly agreed that the method was inclusive for all students and that the definition of giftedness was encompassing. The school staff believed that more ELL students would be referred for gifted services according to their method of identification. However they also noted that the *process* of identifying ELL students as GT might need refining because “we have no formal procedures in place.”

A primary goal of Maple staff is to put together a variety of assessment materials for ELL students who may also be gifted and talented. However, several school staff members commented that the tools they have now may not be appropriate for use with the ELL population:

The tools for identification, so many of them are language based. Are they developmentally appropriate? Culturally appropriate for students? Many of the tests we give, standardized and otherwise, but are just not culturally appropriate for a student linguistically, same situation. So that would be I would say our biggest weakness, our greatest need, finding tools that help us identify accurately.

The teachers also reported that the current assessment measures that are used for referral could possibly be biased. One teacher stated, "I feel that the testing really is an area that we probably do need to continue trying to find something that would be more fair." Other school staff said that they do not place as much emphasis on the tests used to identify these students because "the test really isn't fair." They acknowledged that ELL children often are raised in homes where English is not spoken, and their parents do not speak English. Thus, it was not deemed fair that ELL children be required to take the tests in English. Similarly, some school staff reported not focusing too highly on the results of the cognitive and academic ability testing of ELL students. Other staff stated that ELL students receive multiple accommodations on testing, including the use of an interpreter and the use of a Spanish/English dictionary, and thus are "given extra" and "plenty" of assistance.

Because the state provides the districts a large list of assessments that can be used, school staff reported that they would like more guidance selecting and implementing the best assessment for their ELL population. One teacher would like to see more of "a systematic plan" that is based on research or evidence for increasing ELLs in GT programming. The district allows portfolios and work samples to be used for gifted referral. However, there is currently no checklist or consensus on what the work samples or portfolios should include or demonstrate in order to qualify for referral. In addition, personnel noted that they would like to obtain valid and reliable qualitative measures (such as behavioral checklists, interview forms, etc.) to include in their GT/ELL referral and programming process.

District personnel believed that GT eligibility criteria, especially regarding the ELL population, must be more inclusive than exclusive. They believed that gifted ELL children may have talents that manifest in different ways because of the students' different cultural expectations and values. One general education teacher reported that she "doesn't look at A's and B's as much as I work with the child and give them all kinds of different areas to show their talent in."

The school staff also reported that although they are making their assessment procedures more inclusive of ELLs, the actual number of ELL students who have been referred for GT placement has been very low. In addition, those who were referred have strong English

language abilities. The school staff reported that this lack of ELL referral and placement indicate that there is more work needed and that their practices need to be modified in some way.

### *Current Programming*

The staff was proud of the gifted programming for traditional students. The district has received awards and accolades from the state Department of Education for its innovative and progressive gifted programming. Nonetheless, when it came to programming for ELLs, the district staff was not as confident in their practices. Multiple comments indicated the strong advocacy efforts for ELLs that are underway in the district. However, they realized that their current gifted programming is based primarily on language arts, and, therefore, they understood the current programming may not be suitable for ELLs as designed. One teacher believed this is because “gifted [programming] should be focused on individualizing the instruction to the student and this is not happening [with ELL children].” There also were comments regarding the lack of ELL referral to the current GT programming: “We must change our practices to be more inclusive of ESL children.” However, the staff believed that their programming is receiving strong accolades from the parents of the ELL students currently in gifted programming (e.g., “Parents are supportive and know the school cares and worries about their children”), thus increasing parental support of the school.

### *Staff Efforts*

It was clear that the district communicates with the staff about GT assessment procedures, gifted programming, and professional development. Regardless of staff member position, the interviewees were able to explain the gifted programs and process completely. In addition, according to the school administrators, there are multiple collaboration efforts and task forces aimed at improving gifted services. Title 1 and ESL teachers often work together to improve resources for ELL programming. The GT teachers are strong advocates for ELL students and often serve as parental liaisons, translators/interpreters, and resources for other teachers.



However, because the GT teachers and ESL teachers are seen as information sources, they sometimes felt that other staff do not make the effort to learn about the cultural backgrounds and histories of ELL children. Some staff members reported that there are unrealistic expectations related to parent involvement and housing, among other issues. In addition, some school staff reported that due to the large amount of programs and initiatives, "There's so much going on that it seems like sometimes the GT program is sort of on the periphery." The staff is overwhelmed by changing policies and programming. Other comments also indicated the need for more staff training: "[T]hat would be the second biggest need. . . . [O]nce we get a good identification tool, [we need] cross training so that our gifted teachers, our ESL teachers, know how to work well together for the best instruction of these students."

### *Parental Involvement*

The parent participants identified many positive aspects of the school and also possible areas of improvement. The parents were proud of their children and, in general, believed that they were receiving a superb education. One mother commented that her son (not involved in GT programming) was the first Latino to graduate from Maple's high school.

The parent interviews identified some areas in need of improvement related to communication, however. Newsletters and correspondence often are sent home in English, and the participants commented that they wanted more communication in Spanish. One parent participant commented, "I would like that they improved that, for example, when they have school meetings, they could have some in Spanish . . . because there are times when we come and it's like we shouldn't come because we only understand a little bit." Another parent participant commented, "We have to be asking, 'What did they say?' Then there are times when there is a teacher that is trying to translate, but not in its totality. And we would like it if there were [interpreters] . . . not that they separate us, not that one would be for Hispanics and another for Americans."

One of Maple's goals is to increase parental participation within the school district, especially among families of ELL children. School

personnel reported that although there is an active parent group, too few of those parents are immigrants. One GT teacher reported “[parents] don’t have a voice, they don’t know what’s available in our school system.” In an effort to remedy this issue, the district is planning to provide more meetings and presentations in Spanish for the parents about the curriculum, school services, language programs, and gifted programs. Newsletters and a campaign to increase parental volunteers also are some future goals for Maple.

## **Discussion**

Maple School District is committed to providing the best possible gifted services to all students, including ELLs. However, data analyses provide evidence of several barriers to implementing an effective identification and programming system for gifted ELL students. Due to the high mobility rate of the Latino population in Maple, the school has a difficult time knowing the exact number of ELL students in the district and of those receiving gifted services. A database for all ELL children including those entering and leaving the school would be helpful. Maple also hopes to develop this system with other districts nearby due to the high mobility rate between neighboring districts. In order to facilitate the evaluation of district identification procedures, longitudinally monitoring how many ELL students are receiving gifted services should be a priority.

Smaller numbers of ELL students are enrolled in gifted services than expected. A district protocol should be put in place that outlines each of the steps when assessing and identifying an ELL student as gifted. A district task force should be implemented that monitors the referral and identification procedures for these children. In addition, set-aside slots for ELLs in the gifted program may be beneficial.

The school staff reported they are unfamiliar with appropriate assessment measures and best practice when identifying gifted ELL students. Although the state does provide schools with multiple approved assessment options, Maple teachers are not confident that they are selecting the correct assessments when working with ELLs. Materials can be sent to schools indicating which assessments are recommended based on the population, language ability, and so forth. The state might

consider staying up-to-date on approved assessments and sending updates to schools often, especially when assessments become available in Spanish or another language. The state can appoint a school liaison who is especially familiar with the ELL population.

Educators reported that they are unfamiliar with legal requirements when working with gifted ELL students. They worry there are certain procedures that should be followed that they are not currently aware of. The state can send materials to school districts about what is legally required when an ELL student enters the district in terms of language assessment, identification for special education services, and programming. This information is especially helpful for districts like Maple that have received a large immigrant population in a short time period.

The staff would like assistance in developing an alternate assessment procedure for gifted ELL identification that does not rely on traditional IQ or academic achievement assessments. Although a multifaceted assessment procedure is currently allowed and encouraged by Maple, teachers are unfamiliar with what can be used as criteria for gifted identification. Behavioral checklists and observational checklists should be disseminated to school staff involved with referral to gifted education programs. Professional development activities with the school staff also are crucial to improving awareness and expectations of the ELL population. In addition, information regarding the GT programs in the district and the referral process should be disseminated to parents of ELL children in their native language.

The majority of school staff reported they have little knowledge about the diverse cultures of their students and how it may impact their learning and behaviors in the classroom. In-services and other professional development activities related to understanding diverse cultures can be implemented. In addition, a multicultural curriculum can be adopted to allow all students to learn about and increase acceptance of other cultures and to foster deeper understanding within the school.

Parental involvement is lower than desired by educators in the Maple district. Multiple recommendations follow that are based on parent-identified obstacles discussed in the interviews. Bilingual personnel should be provided at PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) meetings, after-school parent sessions, school open houses, and so

forth. This would improve the likelihood that parents will attend such events and will help them feel more connected. All materials sent home to parents also should be provided in Spanish or the parent's native language. Classes and seminars (e.g., to learn English or to address other topics related to child development) could be offered. Local universities would be a good place to search for people with expertise in various areas who could offer such trainings and sessions at reduced or no cost. In addition, a statewide parental advocacy group can be established. When established, schools can contact this advocacy group and receive information about translating information into the parent's home language, locating interpreters, and setting up an ELL parent group at a particular school.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

This school district was recommended to our research team by the state Department of Education as a district with strong gifted education programming and effective identification practices for ELL students. The state has provided Maple with additional training opportunities to all staff, hired additional staff members committed to advancing underserved populations in GT programming, and given extra funding for additional programming and advocacy for the ELL population. Thus, the authors began the study with the understanding that this district employed more progressive practices than others in the state. Additionally, although School 1 and School 2 are demographically different, with School 2 having a much larger ELL population than School 1, the researchers believe that this provides a broader picture of district practices on the whole than would have been seen if two similar schools were studied.

Although multiple participants from diverse backgrounds were interviewed, the school district rather than the researchers selected and recruited participants for this study. For this reason, some participant groups, particularly ELL students and parents of ELL students, were smaller than the researchers requested. This may be a limitation of the study and could reduce its objectivity and generalizability. Due to the research team's emphasis on confidentiality, the researchers do not believe there was reluctance on the participants' part to discuss issues.

Future descriptive research is needed to address the limitations in the current study and to begin addressing the large gaps in the research on this topic. It would be particularly interesting to learn about identification practices for Latino GT/ELL students in states with larger Latino ELL populations. Multiple data sources (e.g., archival records and direct observation) also would be helpful as researchers build the research base in this area. In addition, statewide analyses of gifted services for ELL students—in the state from which this research study is situated as well as in states with records of strong and extensive gifted programming for ELL students, such as Texas and Arizona—would be beneficial to determine the ways in which districts interpret and utilize the materials and guidelines provided by state Departments of Education. Finally, broadening the research to examine GT/ELL identification practices for native languages other than Spanish would further strengthen the literature base.

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### End Note

1. School district name is a pseudonym.

### Author Note

The research and preparation of this article was supported in part by a grant from the Ohio Department of Education.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Semistructured Interview Protocols**

#### District Level ESL Coordinator

- 1) Tell us about the ELL identification process.
- 2) Describe the structure of the ESL program (i.e., bilingual, immersion, pull out, self-contained).
- 3) What is your understanding of the district's GT identification process? Do you know who refers a child for the GT program (i.e., general education teacher, ESL teacher)?
- 4) Are you aware of current efforts aimed at increasing the ELL representation in GT programming? If yes, please describe these efforts.

#### District Level GT Coordinator

- 1) Tell us about the GT identification process. Describe all of the instruments (including any screening referral) used in the GT identification process.
- 2) Describe the structure of the GT program (i.e., bilingual, immersion, pull out, self-contained).
- 3) What is your understanding of the district's ELL identification process? Who refers a child for the GT program (i.e., general education teacher, ELL teacher)? Are the procedures different if the child is in the ELL or ESL program?
- 4) Are there current efforts aimed at increasing the ELL representation in GT programming? If yes, please describe these efforts.

#### Elementary Campus Administrator

- 1) Tell us about the ELL identification process at your school.
- 2) Describe the structure of the ELL or ESL program (i.e., bilingual, immersion, pull out, self-contained) on your campus.
- 3) What is your understanding of the district's GT identification process? What does it look like on your campus?
- 4) Are you aware of current efforts aimed at increasing the ELL representation in GT? If yes, please describe these efforts.
- 5) Are there specific efforts at increasing the ELL/GT representation on your campus?

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School Psychologist

- 1) Please describe your involvement in the district's ELL or ESL program.
- 2) Please describe your involvement in the district's GT program.
- 3) What is the identification process for ELL students who may also be GT?

Teacher who is eligible to refer students for the GT program

- 1) Describe the GT referral process.
- 2) How do you describe a GT student?
- 3) What do you think about ELL children being identified for the GT program?

Child/children currently in the ELL program

- 1) Tell us what you think about school.
- 2) Is there a teacher or other adult at this school who helps you a lot?
- 3) What can adults at this school do to help you more?
- 4) If you could tell the adults at this school three things that could help you learn better, what would they be?

Child/children currently in the GT program

- 1) Tell us about being in \_\_\_\_\_ (GT Teacher's name) class.
- 2) Do you know how you got into \_\_\_\_\_ (GT Teacher's name) class?
- 3) What if you spoke another language and very little English, do you think you could be in \_\_\_\_\_ (GT Teacher's name) class?
- 4) Do you know what *gifted* means? If so, do you think you are gifted?

Parents of children currently in the GT program

- 1) Tell us about your child's gifted program.
- 2) Do you know how your child got into the gifted program?
- 3) What does gifted mean? What makes your child gifted?
- 4) What are your favorite things about your child's school?
- 5) If you could change something about your child's education, what would you change?