

# ***A Gift for the Gifted: School Counselor Advocacy for Representation of Latino Students in Gifted Education***

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## **Abstract**

Many children from the Latino community require support from school counselors to achieve greatness in academics. Barriers preventing accurate gifted and talented nominations for Latino ELL students presently exist in school systems. Existing barriers can be broken down for student success. This study explored current literature to examine issues facing Latino ELL students with gifted and talented nominations. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory is used to outline the influences from different systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems) on Latino students' lives. The ecological theory creates a framework to understand the social context of Latino gifted ELL students. The authors explain how school counselors can incorporate theory and the ACA advocacy competencies into their work to assist Latino students at the individual, community/school, and social/political levels to increase their representation in gifted education.

Paloma is a Latino female who is currently enrolled at a Georgia elementary school. She completed two years of an English Language Learner (ELL) program at a neighboring school. Although Spanish is her primary language, by working through the ELL program, she is able to speak and understand English well. Paloma seems to be adjusting to her new school. She is well-liked by her peers, but her language arts teacher asked the school counselors to speak to her. The teacher states that Paloma is reluctant to participate in class discussion, rarely takes initiative to go above and beyond as many of her peers do, and overall seems sad and lethargic. The teacher fears it would be best if Paloma were placed back in the ELL program stating she just might not be ready for the regular-ed classroom setting.

Upon speaking to Paloma, it is apparent that returning to the ELL classroom is not an option. Paloma is quite proud of her Latino heritage, but has embraced the English

language whole-heartedly, working very hard to complete the ELL program. She states there are still a few things she may have trouble understanding, but she is willing to do what it takes to be successful. Her counselor also learns that Paloma loves to draw, sing, and play guitar for her family and church. Her favorite subject is math, and she shared that her math class is very different from her other classes. She feels as if she can learn so much so quickly in math. When asked what her concerns are about school, she states that she feels she is not treated as her peers. She feels that her peers are encouraged to challenge themselves and stretch their thinking, whereas her teacher just expects her to do what she can to get by. Her teachers do not call on her as they do the other students, and she is never asked to help around the classroom or take on special tasks. She truly feels as if she is just taking up space. She often wonders if her teachers will ever see her as more than a student of color who cannot compete at the level of her English-proficient classmates.

Paloma's counselor feels she has the potential and determination to be successful. Also evident are Paloma's strengths in math, her creativity, and her willingness to participate and excel, but she is not demonstrating these strengths in class. Her counselor speculates if the language barrier is creating the apparent disconnect between Paloma and her teacher, and if the seeming passivity displayed in the classroom may be indicative of her culture. Questions also arise concerning how well Paloma understands her role in the classroom, her parent's awareness of her educational experiences, and her teacher's knowledge about working with ELL students. In short, Paloma's experience is much like that of many potentially gifted Latino students, students marginalized by a system that does not recognize their gifts.

## **The Marginalization of Latino Students**

For the purposes of this paper, Latino refers to "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (U.S. Census, 2010). English Language Learner (ELL) refers to a student whose native language is a language other than English, and/or a student who comes from an environment in which another language prevails over English. The term nomination refers to the process in which an individual is put forward for consideration for a particular recognition. The term gifted and talented will be defined in regard to the following consensus from the Federal government:

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

According to the United States Census conducted in 2010, the Hispanic/Latino population grew at a rate of 43% from the year 2000 (U.S. Census, 2010). Yet, even

with the rapid growth, research clearly shows an underrepresentation of Latino children in comparison to children of other races in gifted programs:

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

Since the passing of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, education for all, including Latino students, has been mandated. With the mandatory screening of ELL students when they register for school, the hiring of ELL teachers, and the creation of ELL classrooms, Latino students have been afforded opportunities to adapt to and better learn the English language and the rigors of American education, but are these efforts making a significant difference in the achievement possibilities of Latino students? Despite what programs are currently in place, ELL students still perform below the mark in comparison to English proficient students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). They often score lower on high-stakes testing, have lower grade point averages, often drop out of school all together, and certainly fail to reach academic levels proportionate to their ability (Denbo, 2002; Shaffer, Ortman, & Denbo, 2002).



The state of Georgia, the state chosen for this example, outlines guidelines regarding the evaluation and eligibility determination for the gifted and talented program. Students may qualify in either one of two ways. In Option A, students must achieve a score of 99% (Grades K-2) or 96% (Grades 3 -12) or higher on a nationally age-normed mental ability test, and score in the 90% or higher in a nationally-normed achievement test. In Option B, students must qualify in three

of four areas, including; the above-mentioned mental ability and achievement, and/or creativity, and motivation. For creativity, students must score in the 90% or above on a nationally-normed creativity test. In regard to motivation, grade point average is used to evaluate students in grades 6 through 12, and rating scales are used to assess younger students (Georgia Department of Education, 2012). Although these measures appear fairly comprehensive, the process often begins with teacher or parent referral and has a strong reliance on standardized tests and grades, which may negatively impact the opportunities for ELL students to be successful (Ramos, 2010, pp. 152).

All students, including individuals like Paloma, deserve a quality education. This statement is equally valid when a student is being considered for gifted placement. Discovering students' giftedness creates a more extensive and unique educational experience for them. They may be given opportunities to work more creatively, at a faster rate, and delve more deeply into topics than students in a regular education setting. Ensuring that all students learn is top priority for educators, and this should include students reaching their optimal potential as they learn.

When determining gifted and talented eligibility, appropriate measures should be in place, particularly for ELL students. However, current testing procedures in conjunction with potential cultural and/or language barriers may prevent ELL students from demonstrating their true abilities. Educating students, teachers, and the community as a whole increases the opportunities for Latino children to find success in their academics. Although gifted education proves to be less readily available for Latino ELL children (Ramos, 2010, pg. 151), there is indeed a need for change, and the research to support that change is outlined in the following section.

#### **Selected Review of the Literature**

The following section presents current literature indicating the academic, social, and personal status of Latino English Learner (ELL) students and their success within gifted education programs. The review discusses motivation among Latino English language learners, initial nominations of gifted students, gifted programs identifying protocols, and successful strategies that may be used for ELL students found in literature. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provides a cohesive framework to understand the context of Latino ELL students in the community.

#### **Theoretical Orientation**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory illustrates the influences from different systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems) individuals encounter. The

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ecological theory creates a framework to understand the social context of Latino gifted ELL students. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states the following about the theory:

Thus within the a given society or social group, the structure and substance of micro-, meso, and exosystems tend to be similar, as if they were constructed from the same master model, and the systems function in similar ways. Conversely, between different social groups, the constituent systems may vary markedly. Hence, by analyzing and comparing the micro-, meso- and exosystems characterizing different social classes, ethnic, and religious groups, or entire societies, it becomes possible to describe systematically and to distinguish the ecological properties of these larger social context as environments for human development. (Bronfenbrenner ,1979, pp. 8)

According to the theory, educators must know the different social contexts of the Latino ELL student. The immediate setting, the microsystem, includes understanding the student experiences in their respected immediate families or classrooms. The meso-system involves two microsystems interacting with one another. Genuine and effective interaction between schools and family is crucial for this system. Schools must initiate effective communication with families in order to provide necessary assistance to children. The exosystem involves a broader context of culture that influences the student (e.g., parent's workplace, community as a whole, church).

The ecological theory's implementation to gifted nominations is practical and benefits students. The theory helps in providing an understanding of the importance in incorporating all factors in the Latino student's life. After incorporating all factors, an informed decision about gifted nominations can be given. The purpose of Gifted and Talented programs is to nurture the developing dimensions of the most promising students. Rigorous learning opportunities

provide students an opportunity to achieve higher levels of thinking and problem solving (Ramos, 2010). Unfortunately, Latino children and their families are frequently not aware of resources available to them in the school system. Communication between the school and home is essential in providing the necessary resources to the families. Meso-system effectiveness is key for this step. It is imperative for families to have gifted nomination information to move forward in the process. Furthermore, the community as a whole may not be educated about the available resources. Implementing Bronfenbrenner's theory provides structure and effectiveness when implementing interventions and communicating through each domain in the ELL student's life. School counselors must take a holistic approach by expanding their efforts to all areas of the student's social context and including as many contexts of each system as possible.

### **Motivation Among Latino ELL students**

Lack of motivation from Latino students decreases the chances of receiving gifted nominations. Fortunately, the Latino community itself can communicate the importance of motivating students. Motivation for academic success may originate from many different social contexts. Lopez (2010) explains how motivation affects academic performance. Cultural expectations such as learning English create an environment for the student not to thrive. Students may view their native language as a barrier to achieve academic success. Lopez (2010) examined Latino communities and student personal motivation and determined that the social context of the student either decreases or increases the Latino student's motivation to achieve in school. The student's micro and meso systems must communicate with students the importance of becoming an engaged learner. Lopez indicated prolonged effort without the validation of different social contexts (e.g., family, classroom) will result in the disengagement of the student. Families and communities must be informed about opportunities and the expectations of gifted education so that they guide students to achieve their full academic potential.

### **Nominations of Latino ELL students**

The initial steps for children to be involved in gifted education programs are referrals and nominations. Individuals who are familiar with the student's academic abilities can make nominations. The 2012-2013 Georgia Gifted Resource Manual (2012) states students may be referred for gifted curriculum eligibility by teachers, counselors, administrators, parents/guardians, peers, self or others who may have the personal knowledge of the student's academic abilities. Mcbee (2006) compared the referral process across socio-economic and racial lines (e.g., Black, Latino) and indicated teacher and automatic nominations held the most 'weight' for gifted identification. Parental and self-referrals are used less frequently. Black, Latino, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were nominated less than their White peers. Classism, racism, and cultural ignorance may be the cause of low teacher nomination of Black and Latino students. Furthermore, the low incidences of parent nominations may indicate distrust and the feeling of alienation from the school culture due to a lack of knowledge and resources. Different resources can be

used to combat distrust and establish rapport with the student and their family. For instance, bilingual/bicultural social workers can provide information to parents about the gifted nomination process. In addition, school counselors can learn about Latino culture and effective communication tools to communicate with families about gifted nominations. However, Ramos (2010) found self-identification nominations in the Latino community as ineffective due to the nature of the collective culture. Latino children culturally are taught the individual is less important than the group collectively. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to be taught the cultural values and beliefs of the Latino society. The exo-system of the ecological theory may be applied on this level because of the consideration of the community, classroom, and the student's immediate family's culture.

Ramos (2010) indicated teacher recommendations pose problems in the nomination process because of the lack of available professional development on giftedness to increase the improvement of nomination skills. Teachers sometimes lack formal training on identifying cultural characteristics and their associated behaviors. The lack of cultural awareness leads to negative impacts for students of color including the Latino population (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Nevertheless, as will be discussed further, communication between the school and household must convey the option of parental and self-nomination for gifted education. School counselors must advocate for gifted nominations for all students.

### **Identifying Protocols used for Gifted Nominations**

Mcbee (2006) also indicated a bias in standardized tests used for the identification of gifted students as a cause of low teacher nominations among lower SES, Black, and Latino children. Ramos (2010) offered a discussion of bias in identification protocols used for gifted students. Identification protocols have recently been developed by Latino educators to address the increasing issue and provide more equity for minority students' giftedness. The Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test was normed with 20,000 majority white students. The measure did not reflect a cultural bias between White and Latinos students with scores not yielding a statistically significant difference. Furthermore, Ramos (2010) indicated an additional instrument implemented by Cooper, The Classroom Observation Instrument, in the assistance in identifying Latino gifted students. Both instruments yield positive results for the population. Having proper identifying protocols for Latino ELL students remove language barriers from the nomination process. Giftedness for students can be properly measured to ensure correct identification. To be discussed further, school counselors may advocate by communicating the availability of testing alternatives for Latino ELL students.

### **Successful Strategies Used for ELL students**

In addition to using culturally competent protocols for ELL students, various techniques and strategies hold promise for effectiveness with the ELL Latino students (Williamson 2012; Gray & Fleishman 2005; Ramos 2005). Effective instructional strategies for culturally diverse students are simple extensions of approaches that

work well with all students (Gray & Fleishman, 2005). Williamson noted learning techniques taught to parents in their native language if possible is most effective. Furthermore, working with ELL students individually during class time builds a relationship with the students. Students also benefit when teachers and classmates have an opportunity to learn about each other's backgrounds. Williamson stated that using bio poems creates a classroom community that increases academic achievement and student motivation. Bio poems are self-narrative poems children compose describing different facts about themselves and were developed by ReadWriteThink.org. Bio poems help peers learn more about other classmates' cultural background and increases morale and motivation in the classroom.

The use of visual aids (e.g., flash cards, videos, posters computers, graphic organizers) as clarification for the curriculum is a vital asset to help reinforce the primary language to ELL students (Williamson, 2012; Gray & Fleischman, 2005). Gray and Flesichman noted reinforcement, repetition, and modeling are key components for retention of material for the ELL students. Students who display gifted potential thrive when educators and counselors work with them through effective strategies and techniques to further their success.

Educators and school counselors must understand the collective

viewpoint of the Latino population and how to use suitable teaching techniques. Cultural norms for the Latino community are collective: the family is placed before the needs of the individual. It is unusual for an individual to draw attention to him/herself. The norm is to act humble and not openly demonstrate one's gifted abilities within the classroom (Ramos, 2010). Ramos (2010) found group work such as group projects or group portfolios represent the group collective efforts. Group performance projects such as murals, skits, and group reports are examples of activities aiding the collective worldview of the Latino community.

Clearly, Latino ELL students may not be properly identified for gifted programs because of inappropriate identifying protocols. However, innovative identification protocols and teaching methods to aid the process do exist (Ramos, 2010). But the need to represent Latino students in gifted education must expand beyond the teachers. School counselors must consider theoretical and practical interventions to increase Latino ELL student gifted numbers. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory



and the ACA Advocacy Competences (Ratts, Toporek & Lewis 2010) are roadmaps for the school counselor in providing step-by-step guidance to respond to this concern. The ACA Advocacy Competencies call for all counselors, including school counselors, to operate from a social justice counseling perspective, one that focuses on equity instead of equality. The following section explains how the ACA Advocacy Competencies can be followed by school counselors to increase Latino student representation in gifted programs in the sample state of Georgia.

### **A Call to Action**

If a marginalization of a community hinders greatness, the barriers must be broken down so true success can occur. Is this the case for the children of the Latino community? Are children of Latino descent under-represented in gifted and talented programs due to language, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers? Have Latino children, and their parents, been equipped with the necessary knowledge and unwavering assurance of what it takes to be successful in American schools? Are the current laws and programs designed to assist English Language Learner (ELL) students creating high achievers? Can school counselors, working as advocates, significantly address these limitations? School counselors are in the perfect position to address the needs of individual students for whom trending educational procedures place them at a disadvantage. By working through the steps outlined by the ACA Advocacy Competencies, school counselors can advocate for and empower students like Paloma and other Latino students to reach their full potential.

### **Student Advocacy**

Although advocating for ELL students of Latino descent encompasses reaching out to many, according to the ACA Advocacy Competencies, school counselors begin by advocating on behalf and with the individual. School counselors can lead in the identification of interventions for helping individual Latino students improve their educational experiences and achievement.

The example of Paloma illustrates each level of the advocacy competencies. At the student advocacy level, Paloma's school counselors take numerous opportunities to advocate on her behalf, including assigning Paloma to a mentor, establishing a peer helper in the classroom, and creating a small group to work on study skills. Using the mentor program which the school counselor sets up with local community volunteers, Paloma works with a member of the community once a week. This experience provides her with the opportunity for one-on-one, individualized attention to boost her self-concept and understanding that she is an important individual. The peer helper works as a cheerleader, a comrade, a close-knit support system for Paloma in the classroom. The study skills small group focuses on learning concepts in the areas that require more reading, such as, language arts, science, and social studies. Paloma develops skills that help her to focus on the overarching essential questions within a unit which in turn help her to not get bogged down in the language, but see the big picture for quicker, deeper understanding.

### **Student Empowerment**

In regards to advocacy with the individual, school counselors are charged with the task of identifying ways to empower students and help them improve their educational experience. Utilizing the benefits of individual counseling, school counselors work to build student confidence, self-efficacy, and provide in this example Latino students with resources to express themselves in the classroom.

The use of individual counseling services provides a boost in self-esteem, self-motivation, and self-confidence which help to increase Paloma's confidence, both emotionally and academically. Paloma creates a map recording the highlights and pitfalls of their life. The purpose of the map is to visually understand the different journeys taken throughout a lifetime and how the current struggles will be overcome just as past struggles have been. Both short and long term goals, including making a new friend, joining a club at school, or being a more active participant in class are created. During the process, Paloma develops a personal, clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses in all facets of her life (academic, social/personal, and career). Equally important, Paloma's school counselor encourages Paloma to discuss her culture and to share stories about her life and the people and community places that offer her support. Encouraging Paloma to take pride in her culture and to share aspects of it with her class – coordinated with Paloma's teacher – empowers Paloma by pointing her toward the strengths she already has. Her school counselor also encourages the strategy of journaling, asking Paloma to record her thoughts and feelings about her school day and her home life. Journaling allows all students to begin to make connections between their feelings and their thoughts about their context.

In addition to the peer-mentoring program within the school, school counselors may choose to work with counselors at nearby middle and high schools to develop a big brother/big sister mentoring program. Students are recruited through interest meetings and

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Beyond the schoolhouse, school counselor advocacy efforts must reach into the community. It is essential that the parents of Latino students are brought alongside educators to become more knowledgeable themselves, increase and improve communication with the school, and hopefully begin to take steps to advocate for their own children.

are then paired with other students who have similar cultural backgrounds. Mentors and mentee meet typically once a week at the local elementary school to discuss various topics important to their specific culture such as food, music, academics, and other forms of entertainment. Mentors encourage the newer students in the program to develop their skills among areas of interest and encourage involvement within extracurricular activities within the school. As stated previously, the Latino culture strives to have a sense of community, and it is imperative to mirror as much as possible that cultural aspect within the school.

#### **Advocacy at the School Level**

To truly see a change in academic achievement among Latino students, school counselor advocacy efforts must extend throughout the school building and into the Latino community itself. As established in the selected review of the literature, teachers not only need to be educated on the best strategies to use with ELL students and to extend their knowledge of identifying giftedness, they must also understand the importance of “comprehending the worldview of the Latino student” (Ramos, 2010, p. 152). The cultural differences that exist between Latino students and their peers is vast, and to truly know a child and what they are capable of accomplishing in the classroom depends on a teachers’ knowledge of the culture. “Educators must be given extensive professional development on giftedness to improve their identification skills. In addition, professional development experiences should also address cultural sensitivity and an understanding of how giftedness might appear in other cultures” (Ford & Trotman, 2001). Well-planned, purposeful, and thorough teacher training is essential to advocate for this Latino students as steps are made towards more notable inclusion in gifted and talented programs. School counselors can provide this training.

Continuing the example of Paloma’s school system, the school counselor works with the county gifted coordinator and local ELL teachers to create a power point presentation viewed by the faculty during a regularly-scheduled faculty meeting. Throughout the

presentation, current research and data as well as the characteristics and qualities of gifted children are explored and explained. Several student examples provide knowledge about the creative thinker, the perfectionist, students who are twice exceptional, the underachiever, and students from diverse populations, giving teachers a clear understanding of what to look for when considering nominations for the gifted and talented program. The presentation concludes with a question and answer session, led by school counselors, administrators, the gifted coordinator, and ELL educators, and the distribution of a handout for teachers to use for quick reference when considering a student for nomination.

#### **Advocacy Through Community Collaboration**

Beyond the schoolhouse, school counselor advocacy efforts must reach into the community. It is essential that the parents of Latino students are brought alongside educators to become more knowledgeable themselves, increase and improve communication with the school, and hopefully begin to take steps to advocate for their own children. Educating parents about different resources available for their children is imperative for success. Cultural barriers would certainly begin to shatter if Latino parents felt comfortable and certain that working with schools would improve the children’s future.

Again in the example of Paloma’s school and community, joining advocacy efforts with a local church community expressing a desire to expand their outreach, weekly English classes for Latino parents are held. School counselors eagerly work to create a cohesive relationship with parents and use this forum as an opportunity to educate parents on the public school system. Using English and Spanish resources, including, handbooks, newsletters, homework agendas, etc., parents are informed on everything from classroom procedures, the grading system, extracurricular activities, and services available to all students, including the gifted and talented program and the process it entails.

School counselors also visit the local businesses frequented by the Latino families from their school to meet business people and to distribute information about school resources such as the gifted program. Connecting with local leaders is a powerful way to connect with local families.

#### **Public Information**

Changes in gifted and talented identification need to occur, extending current methods of testing to reach those of varying cultural backgrounds and language deficits (Gray & Fleischman, 2005; Ramos, 2010). It is imperative that school counselor advocacy efforts include informing the public of up-to-date research, methods of testing for gifted and talented programs currently in place, and the distinct cultural differences among Latino students that may possibly cause the tests to be inequitable. Using detailed research from McBee (2006) that outlines the staggering differences in the nomination process for students of color compared to their white peers, Paloma’s school counselor prepares a fact sheet and public service announcement distributed to educators, administrators, parents, and students to

inform stakeholders in the community through an editorial to the local newspaper. Using these types of public media works to bring awareness to the need of opening up the opportunity of the gifted and talented programs to a more diverse population.

### **Social/Political Advocacy**

Focusing on the final step of the ACA Advocacy competencies, in this example, Paloma's school counselors enact change at the political level which in this case means addressing the need to make changes to the required testing for the gifted and talented program. Focusing on the use of other potential measures, including, English language proficiency tests acculturation scales, parent interviews, prior academic performance, portfolio and performance-based assessments, and teacher, parent, self-nomination process, Latino students can begin to demonstrate their abilities in new ways that help all to see they truly are gifted individuals.

Again, working with gifted and ELL personnel at the school district level, Paloma's school counselors' efforts reach the school board. With PowerPoint, fact sheets, and public service announcement in hand, the school counselors seek to educate the board as well as propose that changes be made to the current measures used to test students for the gifted and talented program in Paloma's school. In response to the presentation, the board agrees to begin looking at different options for assessing students nominated for the gifted and talented program.

### **Conclusion**

The ACA Advocacy Competencies provide the framework for how school counselors can reach and improve the lives of their marginalized students at the individual, school, community, and political level. Latino children such as Paloma often need the educational and cultural expertise of school counselors to reach their true success. Paloma, along with other Latino students, deserve equity in their education experience, especially as it includes gifted and talented status. School counselors advocating in the different systems that affect their lives can help bring greater equity to the educational experiences of students such as Paloma.

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