# Teacher Judgment in Identifying Gifted/Talented Students

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Although the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1988 provides financial assistance to state and local educational agencies and gives highest priority to students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities, the under-representation of economically disadvantaged students in gifted and talented program still persists (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Reffel & Reffel, 2004; USDE, 1993). In a study that examined relationships between the participation in gifted and talented programs and socioeconomic status, McKenzie (1986) found significant relationships existed between participation in gifted and talented programs and the variables of race and socioeconomic status. Additionally, in a more recent study, Reffel and Reffel (2004) found significant negative relationships between the percentage of youth in the gifted and talented programs and the percentage of youth receiving free or reduced lunch.

The first step to addressing the under-representation of economically disadvantaged students in gifted education is to focus on recruitment. Recruitment in gifted education includes screening, identification and placement decisions. In most schools, entering the screening pool is based on teacher referrals (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). This practice or policy hinders the effective screening of culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged students because they are seldom referred by teachers for screening (Ford, 1996; Grossman, 1995).

Specifically, a poor student may meet the school district's criteria for giftedness, but be overlooked because he/she has not been referred for screening. Indeed, perceptions about economically disadvantaged students combined with a lack of cultural understanding may undermine the ability of educators to recruit economically disadvantaged students into gifted education. According to Powell and Siegle (2000), for the past several decades there has been a general perception that teachers are poor at identifying gifted and talented students.

One of the most serious problems plaguing in the field of gifted education is the need for the development of appropriate programs and identification procedures for gifted and talented students from different culturally and diverse backgrounds (Ford & Harris, 1991; Maker, 1996). Therefore, there has been increased attention and efforts devoted to the academic needs of gifted and talented children from different culturally and diverse backgrounds (e.g., Baldwin, 2002; Hébert, 2002; Reis & McCoach, 2002).

One impediment to good teacher judgment about gifted and talented but culturally different students may very well be negative teacher attitudes toward children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005; High & Udall, 1983). Indeed, in a more recent study, Elhoweris et al. (2005) reported that when teachers were asked to refer students for gifted and talented programs based on hypothetical student profiles, teachers were found to refer the non-labeled student at a slightly higher rate in comparison to the African American student.

Social class may also serve as a basis for stereotyping and several investigations have documented the negative stereotypes which portray lower-class students (e.g., Grossman, 1995; Miller, 1972; Mutua, 2001). In many classrooms initial social class stereotypes may be influential in teacher expectancies; this was suggested earlier by Rist (1970). In a study that examined the effect of socio-economic status on teachers' perceptions, Rist also (1971) found that teachers have prejudice against poor students. Boyce (1990) found that teachers in high socioeconomic status schools had higher or greater expectations for student academic achievement than did their counterparts in low socioeconomic status schools. Additionally, Guskin, Peng, and Simon (1992) found that low socioeconomic status students overall were seen as less confident. Grossman (1995) reported that poor students often are treated in an even more discriminatory manner than their middle-class peers.

In a study that investigated the role of the student socioeconomic status (SES) and teacher efficacy in the special education referral decisions, Podell and Soodak (1993) found that student socio-economic status and teacher efficacy interact in their influence on special education referral decision. Additionally, Frey (2002) found that children described as low-socioeconomic status were more likely to be referred for restrictive placements in special education programs than their peers who described as high socioeconomic status in the case study.

It is apparent from this review of the relevant literature that socioeconomic status was a significant factor that affects teachers' educational decision making (e.g., Boyce, 1990; Frey, 2002; Guskin et al., 1992; Podell & Soodak, 1993). Additionally, previous research studies which examined the role of socioeconomic in gifted education were limited to relationships data (e.g., Mckenzie, 1986; Reffel & Reffel, 2004). No empirical study has been found that investigated the effect of the child's socioeconomic status on teachers' referral and recommendation for placement in the gifted and talented program.

Therefore, the particular focus of this study was to examine the effect of socioeconomic status on teachers' eligibility decisions in the gifted and talented program. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of the student's socioeconomic status on

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teachers' referral and recommendation for placement in the gifted and talented program.

## Method

### *Participants*

This study was part of a larger study which focused on the effect of the child's characteristics on teachers' educational decision-making with respect to gifted and talented programs. A stratified cluster sampling technique (Gay & Airasian, 2000) was used to select a sample for this study. The sample was drawn from 16 elementary schools from three geographical quadratics of a large midwestern city school district (Northeast, Northwest, and Southwest).

Of the 280 elementary teachers contacted, 207 agreed to participate in this study. The majority of the participants were female (92%). The racial composition is also representative with 83% of the participants being White. In terms of their age range, the majority of the participants (41%) ranged between 46 years or older, with 31% ranging between the age 36 and 45, and 28% were under the age of 36.

The majority of the participants were general educators (84.6%), 11.1% were special educators, and 4.3% were gifted educators. In terms of years of teaching experience, the majority of the participants (66%) reported that they had at least seven years of teaching experience.

### *Instrument*

One way to examine how elementary educators make referral and placement recommendations in the gifted and talented programs is by asking them to respond to a vignette. The use of a vignette as a method to examine teachers' educational decisions is used extensively in research (e.g., Frey, 2002).

The instrument used in this study was a short vignette about a fourth grade student who possessed the characteristics identified in research of an individual who could be classified as a gifted and talented student, and therefore would qualify for placement in a gifted/talented program. To assure content validity, all the student traits in the vignette were derived from descriptions of gifted children in special education introductory textbooks by Davis and Rimm (2004), Hallahan and Kauffman (2000), and Piirto (1999). Attached to the vignette was a response sheet containing two statements. The test-retest reliability for the two statement items was adequate for the purpose of this study ($r=.75$, $p<.05$; $r=.76$, $p<.05$).

Two groups were randomly constituted from the participants' pool. Group 1 received a vignette describing a student representing low-middle socioeconomic status, and Group 2 received a vignette describing a student representing an upper-middle class status. The two vignettes were identical except for the socioeconomic status of the child. Following the brief vignette, participants were asked to indicate, on a 6-point Likert-type scale, their level of agreement to the following two statements:

(a) This student should be referred for a comprehensive evaluation for possible placement in a gifted and talented program.

(b) I feel this student should be placed in a gifted and talented program.

Reading the vignette and responding to the two questions took approximately 15 minutes. In addition to the information which was gathered from the two questions, other information on teacher characteristics described in the participants section was collected, including teachers' race, gender, age, educational level, and teaching experience.

### *Procedure*

The researcher was introduced to the entire faculty in each participating school during a faculty meeting. The researcher gave a brief overview of the study and handed out packets of the study to the faculty who expressed a willingness to participate in the study. Each packet handed out at the faculty meeting contained a consent form, instruction sheet, demographic information sheet, study vignette, and questionnaire.

Participants were told in the instruction sheet that the researcher was interested in how teachers perceived gifted youngsters. The participants were asked to read the vignette of the child and to answer the two questions. The teachers at each school were seated in groups of four to eight, with those remaining forming an additional group. Participants were randomly assigned to two treatment conditions (low middle SES, upper middle SES).

## Results

The effects of the student socioeconomic status (SES) upon the two dependent variables of teachers' referral and placement decisions were tested using MANOVA. The results indicated a non-significant main effect for socioeconomic status [$\Lambda=.989$; $F(2, 200)=1.092$, $p\geq.05$]. Reported below are results from the between-subjects MANOVA tests for each dependent variable.

### *Referral Decision*

The MANOVA results showed no statistically significant difference ($F=1.970$, $p\geq.05$) between the teachers' decision to refer children who represented an upper socio-economic status compared to children who represented a lower socioeconomic status. Specifically, the referral recommendations of teachers who read a vignette describing a student from low SES were not statistically different from the referral recommendations of teachers reading the vignette describing a student from upper SES.

However, data shown in Table 1 suggested that teachers tended to refer the student who represented an upper-middle socioeconomic status for the gifted/talented program more likely than the student who represented lower-middle socioeconomic status.

### *Placement Decision*

The MANOVA results showed no significant effect for the students' socioeconomic status ($F=1.812$, $p\geq.05$). The placement recommendations of teachers who read a vignette describing a student from low SES were not statistically different from the placement recommendations of teachers reading the vignette describing a student from upper SES.

However, data shown in Table 1 suggested that teachers tended to place the student who represented an upper-middle socioeconomic status in the gifted/talented program more likely than the student who represented lower-middle socioeconomic status.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of the student's socioeconomic status on teachers' referral and recommendation for placement in the gifted and talented program. The data consisted of the participants' responses on the 6-point Likert-Scale to the two questions. The procedure involved the collection of data from elementary school teachers across a large midwestern city. The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to test for significance differences between the students' socioeconomic status on the two dependent

variables of teachers' referral and placement decisions.

The main effect of socioeconomic status was not statistically significant; that is, the recommendations of teachers who read a vignette describing a student from low socioeconomic status were not statistically different from the recommendations of teachers reading the vignette describing a student from upper socioeconomic status. Although the SES main effect was not statistically significant in this study, data shown in Table 1 suggested that teachers tended to refer the student who represented an upper-middle socioeconomic status for the gifted/talented program more likely than the student who represented lower-middle socioeconomic status and to place more likely the student who represented an upper-middle socioeconomic status in the gifted/talented program than the student who represented a lower-middle socioeconomic status.

The SES mean scores as shown in Table 1 suggested that teachers' tendencies move in the same direction with the results of previous studies which indicated that teachers' decisions about poor children are susceptible to bias (e. g., Frey, 2002; Mutua, 2001; Podell & Soodak, 1993). For instance, in a study that comparing the way teachers treated African American students from different socioeconomic-class backgrounds, Rist (1971) found that teachers have prejudice against poor students. Guskin, et al. (1992) also found that low SES students overall were seen as less confident. Additionally, Boyce (1990) concluded that teachers in high SES schools had higher or greater expectations for student academic achievement than did their counterparts in low SES schools. The majority of teachers who participated in this study were teaching low SES students. This may be a good explanation of why these teachers tended to expect less from poor children.

The results of this study suggested that labels that have been appended to the student can have an initial negative effect upon teacher's referral and placement decisions in the gifted and talented program. The way that teachers evaluate the case vignettes differently could also be explained as a halo effect; that is, teachers probably unconsciously tend to place a sort of a "halo" over poor students. This view has been discussed earlier in the literature by Fraiser (1987), who indicated that a persisting attitude is that gifted and talented characteristics cannot exist in lower class populations. A review of the literature by Cooper (1989) supports the fact that not only do teachers' expectations of student performance influence student achievement, but "teachers' expectations of students' performance may vary as a function of students' social class" (p. 1763).

There were a number of limitations in this study which should be considered when interpreting the data. Despite the intent to select a sample drawn from large metropolitan midwestern city school districts in order to maximize the potential to include teachers from different cultural backgrounds and schools with different levels of socio-economic status, the results produced a homogenous sample. Schools with different levels of socio-economic status have been found to affect teachers' expectations (Boyce, 1990). Therefore, the use of a more heterogonous sample could likely have different results.

Additionally, the population used for the study was limited to elementary school teachers, which prohibits generalization to other teachers. It is also geographically limited to people living in the midwestern United States. People in other parts of the country may react different from those who live in the midwest.

Finally, this study was limited by the use of case vignettes. Elementary school teachers' responses to the vignette cannot be assumed to be identical to their responses to actual educational settings. Therefore, the current study may underestimate the impact of socioeconomic status, since bias may be more evident in an actual practice setting than it would be when reading a brief vignette.

The majority of the participants in this study are experienced teachers who have at least seven years of teaching experience. Less experienced teachers may consider socioeconomic status differently than more experienced teachers. Therefore, a recommendation for similar research that includes teachers with varying levels of teaching experience is appropriate.

### Implications of the Data

The results of this study suggested that teachers tended to refer and place more likely the student who represented an upper socioeconomic status in the gifted and talented program than the student who represented a lower socioeconomic status. Since surveys of several screening practices indicate frequent reliance on teacher referrals in the identification of gifted and talented children (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Marland, 1972; Renzulli & Vassar, 1967), and poverty in the United States continues to grow rapidly (Salend, 2005), teacher education programs may need to prepare teachers to be more culturally sensitive.

According to Lazar (2004), becoming more culturally sensitive requires deliberate reflection and action. Therefore, college courses may need to focus more on reflection and inquiry. Teachers also should be aware of how low expectations may have a negative impact on teaching behavior. According to Gay (2000), teacher expectations influence the quality of learning opportunities provided to students: "If teachers expect students to be high or low achievers, they will act in ways that cause this to happen" (p. 57)

Teachers can be multicultural agents only if they truly believe that children who are culturally diverse are fully capable to benefit from instruction that is rich with powerful ideas. Therefore, teachers may need to broaden their perspectives of other cultures and to be aware of how their own personal values can affect their evaluation of the economically disadvantaged gifted child.

**Table 1**

**Means and Standard Deviations for the Teachers' Referral and Placement Decisions**

| | | Based on the Child's SES | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Student's SES*** | | ***Referral Decision*** | ***Placement Decision*** |
| Lower | Mean | 4.73 | 4.40 |
| | N | 100 | 100 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.13 | 1.29 |
| Upper | Mean | 4.93 | 4.63 |
| | N | 107 | 107 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.01 | 1.14 |

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