

Who are Gifted/Talented Defining Our Terms English Language Learners?

Gifted and talented English Language Learners are unique and challenging students. Like all gifted and talented students, they are curious, creative, observant, and sensitive. All gifted and talented students are the best and brightest of any community in which they live, whether in Iowa or abroad. They are members of our community and future leaders of their generation.

In order to have a respectful dialogue about gifted and talented English Language Learners, it's essential to define the basic terms we will be using in this document. The topic of gifted / talented students and in particular, gifted / talented English Language Learners has few universally accepted definitions.

This section provides a starting point, as we narrow the scope of our ideas about the following Limited English Proficient (LEP) terms:

- ELL (also Limited English Proficient) student
- Gifted/talented student
- Gifted/talented ELL
- ELL program options

English Language Learners

Who is an English Language Learner? The short answer, according to the U.S. Department of Education is that any student whose home language is not English and whose English language proficiency is considered limited. The *Bilingual Education Act* defines an English Language Learner or Limited English Proficient student as fitting any of the following criteria:

- Not born in the United States and whose heritage language is not English;
- Of American Indian or Alaskan heritage and who comes from an

environment where the dominant language is not English;

- A migratory person whose heritage language is not English; or
- A person who has difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English, which denies him/her the opportunity to learn effectively in classes where instruction is in English.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)-leaders from each state department of education-defines an ELL as having “a language background other than English, and their proficiency in English is such that the probability of the students’ academic success in an English-only classroom is below that of an academically successful peer with an English background.” In other words, by definition, an ELL or LEP student is academically challenged because they are not yet able to understand, speak, read, and/or write fluently in English.

Closer to home, the Code of Iowa defines fully English proficient as a student who is able to use English to ask questions, to understand teachers and reading materials, to test ideas, and to challenge what a teacher is asking in the classroom (see CD). The four language skills contributing to proficiency include reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

It's the Law

The special needs of ELLs enrolled in public and nonpublic schools have been defined in several federal legislative actions, beginning with the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*. That was followed by the *Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974* and again by Titles I and III of the 2001 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (better known as *No Child Left Behind*). By law, ELLs have a right to education that specifically addresses their unique learning needs.

The Path to Proficiency

For a student to move from little or no understanding of English to being fully capable of academic success is a long journey, usually taking from four to 10 years. As we think about identifying gifted/talented students among our English Language Learner population, we need to keep in mind Cummin's two stages of language acquisition used by the Iowa Department of Education. (See Resources in back.)

The first stage is Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). Students at this level are using conversational English for "basic survival." This stage takes from one to three years to master.

The second stage, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), is highly significant to educators; this is the stage of language proficiency at which a student can fully achieve academic success. This stage takes an additional three to seven years to master. As with any skill, the time needed to achieve proficiency varies according to factors such as the student's background and experiences; age; first-language proficiency; and how much support the family, school, and community provide.

Gifted and Talented Defined

Iowa and other states have developed definitions of giftedness based on the work of several researchers whose findings identified the characteristics of Gifted/Talented students.

Critically important to Iowa educators is the definition stated in the Code of Iowa (see CD-ROM). Iowa Code states that gifted and talented students are "those identified as possessing outstanding abilities who are capable of high performance and require appropriate instruction and educational services commensurate with their abilities and needs beyond those provided by the regular school program. Gifted and talented children include those children with demonstrated achievement or potential ability." The Iowa Code specifies that students with gifts and talents will demonstrate achievement or potential ability, or both, in any of the following areas or in combination:

ELL Program Options

Schools have several options for transitioning students from their heritage language to English academic proficiency. Each option has its advantages. Yet it also has its own set of stressors for both the students and the teacher. Each school district must decide which type of program, or combination of program, options work best for their students, families, and faculty. Regardless of the program option, all programs must provide English language development instruction for English Language Learners

Dual Language, or Two-Way Immersion (TWI), programs unite students from two native language groups, such as native speakers of English and native speakers of Spanish. TWI programs integrate language-minority and language-majority students for all or part of the school day. The goal of TWI is to promote bilingualism and biliteracy as well as grade-level academic achievement for all students. TWI is considered by some to be an enrichment model for both language-majority and language-minority students.

In *English as a Second Language* programs, most of the curriculum is taught in English with pull-out or push-in classes. Instruction concentrates on improving the students' academic English language proficiency.

In *bilingual* programs, the entire curriculum is taught in both English and the students' heritage language(s).

- General intellectual ability
- Creative thinking
- Leadership ability
- Visual and performing arts ability
- Specific ability aptitude

Attributes of Giftedness

Fortunately, many scholars and educators now recognize that not all students will display their gifts through academic achievement and assessments. For example, a 1995 review of the literature yielded 10 central attributes of the concept of giftedness.

- Motivation to learn
- Effective communication skills
- Intense and sometimes unusual interests
- Effective problem-solving strategies
- Creativity and/or imagination
- Expansive memory
- Inquisitive
- High level of insight
- Logical approach to reasoning
- Ability to understand humor

For each of these attributes of giftedness, students manifested a variety of behaviors. Equally important, these behaviors were noted to be influenced by the student's cultural and environmental back- grounds.

Disagreement over Definitions

To successfully identify an English Language Learner for gifted programming, let's first define "giftedness." What does it look like? How does the term apply to a student who is struggling to understand and speak the language we generally use to measure it? There are numerous and often nebulous definitions of what constitutes giftedness within our own society. So how do we determine what giftedness means for English Language Learners from another culture?

Research provides excellent resources for looking at giftedness and the factors involved in defining it. To investigate further, see references in bibliography. However, scholars find it hard to agree on what the term "giftedness" means.

To date, there is no one theory or definition of "gifted and talented." Some scholars say that giftedness is a psychological construct or mental state that can't be measured. Others argue that what giftedness is, isn't as important as how it manifests; in other words, the important thing is that we can measure the behaviors that result from it.

What We Have Learned about Gifted Children

In 2004, the Gifted Development Center, as a service for the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, summarized the results of a 23-year study in which they conducted 4,200 gifted/talented assessments. Their findings are summarized in 23 numbered paragraphs from "*What have we learned about gifted children?*" The following results are excerpted from eight of those paragraphs:

- There are more exceptionally gifted children in the population than anyone realizes.
- Mildly, moderately, highly, exceptionally, and profoundly gifted children are as different from each other as are other identified subgroups, but the differences among levels of giftedness are rarely recognized.
- Parents are excellent identifiers of giftedness in their children.
- Over 60 percent of gifted children are introverted compared with 30 percent of the general population. Over 75 percent of highly gifted children are introverted.
- Giftedness is not elitist. It cuts across all socioeconomic groups.
- Gifted children are asynchronous. Their development tends to be uneven, and they often feel out-of-sync with age peers and with age-based school expectations.

Open Eyes and Open Minds

Various lists provide samples of gifted characteristics described in literature. Most of these lists include concepts such as inquisitiveness, motivation, curiosity, memory, inquiry, imagination, insight, reasoning, problem-solving, communication, humor, creativity, and identification of hobbies and project interests.

What educators must remember is that concepts such as these can look very different in individual students. Curious children do not necessarily show us that they are inquisitive, and they may not appear to be motivated. A student who has remarkable ability in all academic areas may not successfully complete advanced-level work. We have to be open to the possibility that we may be overlooking talented students who don't seem to "fit the mold" because they do not demonstrate stereotypical behaviors of native English speaking students.

The Gifted/Talented English Language Learners

Although researchers agree that educators need to know the characteristics of a gifted English Language Learner, there is disagreement—and little research—about these characteristics. Research has described gifted English Language Learners as having varying degrees of the following characteristics:

- acquires a second language rapidly ,
- shows high ability in mathematics,
- displays a mature sense of diverse cultures and languages,
- code switches easily (think in both languages),
- demonstrates an advanced awareness of American expressions,
- translates at an advanced level (oral)
- navigates appropriate behaviors successfully within both cultures.

The researchers may have derived these characteristics from their earlier work called Project GOTCHA (Galaxies of Thinking and Creative Heights of Achievement), which emphasizes an English Language Learner's unique creative abilities.

Project GOTCHA

Galaxies of Thinking and Creative Heights of Achievement.

According to Project GOTCHA, the gifted/talented English Language Learner demonstrates the following characteristics:

School Based

1. Is able to read in their native language two grade levels above their current grade.
2. Shows high ability in mathematics.
3. Is advanced in creative domains (fluency, elaboration, originality, and flexibility).
4. Is a leader in multiple settings (playground, home, clubs, etc.).

Language Based

1. Demonstrates language proficiency levels that are above nongifted students who are also English Language Learners.
2. Learns multiple languages at an accelerated pace.
3. Shows the ability to code switch.
4. Wants to teach others words from their heritage language.
5. Is willing to translate for others.
6. Has superior knowledge of phrases and heritage dialects along with the ability to translate meanings in English.
7. Has a grasp on jokes related to cultural differences.

Culture Based

1. Balances behaviors expected in both the heritage and the new culture.
2. Is willing to share his/her heritage culture.
3. Shows pride in his/her culture and ethnic background.
4. Demonstrates a global sense of community and respect for cultural differences.

Historically Speaking

The search to identify characteristics of gifted students from diverse populations is not new. What may be surprising to some of us is how little some things have changed in 30 years. We've come a long way, but we're not there yet.

1974: A study of gifted Mexican-American students reported that they exhibited leadership, acceptance of authority, self-control, and advanced school performance.

1983: When researchers investigated how teachers selected students for gifted/talented programs, they found that in addition to scores on intelligence and achievement tests, the teachers relied on socioeconomic status (SES), race, ethnicity, attractiveness, good behavior, and good grades. The study suggests that educators within the recent past were more likely to rely on stereotypical notions about SES, race, and ethnicity when identifying a student's potential. This would presumably happen even more frequently in the absence of academic records, as is often the case with economically disadvantaged and minority students.

1995: In a survey of attitudes titled, *Why do we identify so few children from economically disadvantaged and LEP backgrounds?*, in which 750 administrators, counselors, and teachers (65 percent elementary schools, 14 percent middle schools, 23 percent high schools) responded, survey participants perceived the following two factors as primarily responsible for the under-representation of disadvantaged and LEP students:

- Standardized tests are biased (70 percent).
- Teachers are unable to recognize indicators of potential giftedness in these pupils (62 percent).

Given these results, it is clear that educators were looking for ways to identify these children, but were often unsure how to do so.

2002: In a study that looked at the affective characteristics of children referred to gifted/talented programs, researchers found that they are typically quiet, well behaved and well dressed, and get good grades. The researcher concluded that by excluding the cultural or environmental influences on the ways in which students show their giftedness and talent, we may be limiting identification to particular cultural groups. Studies such as these likely served as a catalyst for the cultural diversity training that occurs in American schools to a much larger extent today.

In the Context of Their Culture

What is different for English Language Learners is the emphasis on their gifts *within the cultural context of learning a second-language*. In general, lists generated by various researchers suggest that gifted/talented English Language Learners essentially display characteristics similar to those of English-speaking gifted/talented students.

If we keep this fact in mind, we can identify English Language Learners whether they demonstrate their gifts in the cultural environment of their heritage or in their new home. These observations can be a valuable supplement to standardized test scores. In the end, we will have a more comprehensive

identification process for selecting high potential English Language Learners for gifted/talented programming.

There's little research to support that such lists are reliable and valid ways of identifying gifted/talented ELLs. However, doing our best to understand what a gifted/talented English Language Learner looks and acts like, we are more likely to recognize them in our schools.

Once we recognize English Language Learners as gifted, those of us who are entrusted with their future the caregivers in their homes, the teachers in their classrooms, and the administrators of the schools they attend can be more effective as their advocates.

What's the Recognizing Bias Challenge?

With passage of the *Equal Education Opportunity Act* (1974), Congress effectively declared that human academic potential exists within all groups of people. Yet, even decades later, disproportionately few English Language Learners are included in gifted/talented educational programs. This section describes some of the factors that may be involved in these inequities for our English Language Learners.

Reliance on Standardized Tests

Intelligence and academic achievement test scores are most often used to recognize and identify, as well as develop and evaluate, gifted/talented students' potential. Many researchers urge caution, however. Heavy reliance on standardized tests results in diverse groups of students being unequally represented, with greater concentrations in special education classes and fewer concentrations in gifted/talented classrooms.

This caution also applies when using standardized *non-verbal* intelligence tests. All tests assume a certain kind of language socialization, and students who lack this socialization are, by definition, disadvantaged. Even when the test is nonverbal, test administrators must use language to tell the students what they are to do. Selecting tests that reduce cultural and linguistic bias is not an easy task, and it's questionable whether any test is truly "culture free."

Cultural Context

When identifying gifted/talented students who are culturally diverse, or have limited English proficiency, we must do so within the context of their cultural background. We need to understand, for example, that behaviors signaling giftedness in one culture may signal disrespect in another. To a teacher, a student who provides information the teacher doesn't know may be viewed as precocious.

But, when viewed by the student's parents, that same behavior may well be considered disrespectful.

Of course, the opposite is also true. Behaviors that a teacher might *devalue* as signs of conformity such as not correcting an adult who has given inaccurate information may be highly *valued* by the student's parents as serving the collective good of the family.

National and State Data by Ethnicity

Data provided by the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) shows that, while 7.9 percent of all African American, 6.7 percent of all Hispanic, and 2.1 percent of all Heritage American students surveyed were enrolled in gifted/talented programs, a disproportionately high 17.5 percent of all Asian American students and 9 percent of all white students were enrolled.

The 2006-2007 Iowa Public School data of gifted students vs. total K-12 enrollment shows 4.6 percent African American, 3.3 percent Hispanic, 3.25 percent American Indian students were identified for gifted programming. Also, 12.4 percent Asian American and 9 percent white students were identified for gifted programming in Iowa public schools.

Language Prejudice

Even differences in English Language Learner dialects have been found to influence initial administrator and teacher judgments. Such judgments are critically important because they can influence how administrators and teachers view an English Language Learner's potential giftedness.

If an educator stereotypes a certain culture as not valuing education, he or she is not as likely to view a student from that culture as bright. This attitude also may lead to fears that by admitting a student from that culture into the gifted/talented program, its quality will be watered-down.

Professional development that raises cultural awareness may help refute these stereotypes and result in more equitable representation in gifted/talented programs by students of all cultures.

When we do accept cultural differences, we still may not recognize or understand cultural behaviors that are different from our own. We may not even recognize giftedness if it is expressed in ways other than those we are accustomed to seeing. When parents, administrators, and teachers are able to recognize how the diverse expressions of giftedness and talent are impacted by cultural and linguistic factors, we will be able to recognize the indicators of potential.

When intelligence, achievement, and ability test scores are used as the criteria for admission to gifted/talented programs, African American, Hispanic, and Native American children are disproportionately underrepresented. In some cultures, the use of such test scores signals a lack of respect for the families' heritages and the ways in which giftedness may be expressed within them.

Steps to address these biases include conscious and intentionally directed K-12 multicultural professional development, the choice of culturally appropriate assessments, and the analysis and use of all data.

Cultural Bias

Classroom teachers or other school personnel frequently refer students for gifted identification and programming. A particular challenge for educators who are responsible for teaching gifted/talented students who do not speak fluent English, can be the lack of training in identifying their gifted and talented abilities.

Research findings support that the limited inclusion of English Language Learners in gifted/talented programs is sometimes based on discriminatory attitudes. Although we may think we're aware of our own biases, we may have stereotypes and prejudices that devalue other cultures.

Caught Between Two Languages

For English Language Learners, learning and living in two languages and cultures can be especially challenging. Many parents of ELLs try to transmit their cultural values by having their children learn and speak their heritage language at home. At the same time, English Language Learners may be pressured to accommodate the values of the school culture by being encouraged to speak only English. This challenge places many English Language Learners in the position of having to simultaneously learn the values inherent in two separate and distinct language cultures.

An Inequitable Standard

For many people, the concept of “giftedness” equates to high academic achievement. For English Language Learners who are not yet fluent in English, this is an inequitable standard. It excludes English Language Learners, and minority children who do not do well on academic assessments, but who have elevated general abilities as measured by nonverbal ability assessments.

Instruments that can detect giftedness and talent in English Language Learners are sorely lacking, and inadequate assessment procedures continue to contribute to the under representation of English Language Learners in gifted/talented programs. Recommendations for assessment include the need for assessment measures that do not rely on language and to gather student information from multiple sources.

Iowa Administrative Code, Chapter 12, states that gifted and talented programming include multiple selection criteria for identifying gifted and talented students from the total student population. Standardized assessments are not required for identification in Iowa schools.

While some students show their gifts/talents in the classroom, others may only show the “potential for responding positively” to gifted and talented programming not enough evidence for program referral.

What’s the Solution?

It’s clear that a variety of factors are responsible for the inequitable identification of English Language Learners for gifted/talented programs. So now that we know some of the challenges, what can we do about them? How can we ensure fairness in screening all students so that we can provide them with services tailored for their particular combination of talent and intelligence? Section 3 attempts to answer these questions.