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Where Are We Now?: A Study of Gifted Program Availability by Region, Urbanicity and SES

Elizabeth A. Romey

There is considerable diversity among gifted programs and program availability in the United States. This is at least in part due to the fact that there is no national mandate for gifted programming, despite the existence of the Javitts Act. Instead, decisions about gifted programming are left up to the individual states, which may then choose to allow individual counties or districts to set their own standards. This in turn creates a situation in which parents and teachers of the gifted have no ready access to information about the type of gifted programming options available in their area. Many of them seek assistance through national organizations such as the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT), which are not equipped to help them. Thus, a descriptive study of the locations of gifted programs and the age ranges they serve will be a useful resource for parents and teachers of the gifted and will lay the foundation for future research into the efficacy of gifted programming across regions and settings.

There is considerable interest among parents of the gifted in locating communities which provide services for gifted students. The National Research Center on the Gifted And Talented alone receives scores of queries on this topic, despite the fact that they do not have direct access to this information, which is at best organized at the state level by state organizations for the gifted or even at the local level where no state organization exists.

This lack of national-level data is at least in part due to the fact that there is no national mandate requiring gifted programming in all states (Jean Gubbins, personal communication, Fall 2003) or providing federal standards for program participation. Decisions about whether to provide services for the gifted are left up to the individual states, which may in turn pass the buck to the local level so that individual districts may make their own decisions about programming.

An exception to this hands-off attitude involves

some states, primarily in the Southeast, which are under watch by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and are mandated not only to have gifted programs but to have programs which serve specific demographics, i.e. minority students (Barbara Romey, personal communication, April 2005). Thus, an understanding of the effects of region and urbanicity on socio-economic status (SES) will need to take into account the role of the OCR in determining gifted program policy in some states.

In addition to presenting a challenge to parents seeking services for their gifted children and teachers of the gifted seeking jobs in their field, this lack of centralized information also presents a challenge to researchers. The effect of individual-level variables such as parental education and SES on gifted program participation and student achievement is so well known that many scholars in gifted education, including eminent theorists, have indicated that further research into these areas may not be necessary, since the point has already been proven (Joseph S. Renzulli, personal communication, April 2005).

However, such studies have not explored the impact of larger-scale variables such as region and urbanicity on gifted program participation, nor have they explored interaction effects between these larger-scale variables and the individual-level variables such as SES, which are known to have an effect on gifted program participation. Most existing studies explore single programs (Berger, 1994; Bittker, 1991; Bixler & Cowan, 1964; Hertzog, 2003; Howley, 2002; Kennedy, 2003; Swiatek, 2002; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991), different programs in comparable settings, (VanTassel-Baska, Avery, Little, & Hughes, 2000) or at most compare a few programs across region or urbanicity (Johnsen, Haensly, Ryser, & Ford, 2002; Gentry, Rizza, & Gable, 2001). In other words, studies have not been done exploring whether region, urbanicity, or school sector impact the effect of individual-level variables on gifted program participation.

In part, this is because doing so would require advanced statistical techniques using propensity scores with hierarchical linear modeling (D. Betsy McCoach, personal communication, April 2005). Until recently, such techniques have not been explored, and only a few researchers are making use of them at this point (Hong, 2004). Therefore, a descriptive study of the settings of gifted programs and the age ranges they serve can be used to set the stage for further research into the differential impacts of individual-level variables affecting student achievement across region, urbanicity, and school sector.

Because of the impact of the OCR on the existence of gifted programs, it is reasonable to hypothesize that there will be a greater number of gifted programs serving a broader age range in Southern schools, regardless of urbanicity. The research also suggests that there will be more gifted programs in suburban areas than in rural areas. However, as stated previously, there is little indication of the impact of the interaction of urbanicity and region on gifted programming, particularly in regions where there is no mandate for gifted programming.

Purpose/Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine the distribution and concentration of gifted programs across region, urbanicity, and socio-economic status, and what ages the programs serve. The research question is: Is the difference in number of gifted programs by school SES impacted by urbanicity and region?

Method

The data are taken from the restricted-access database from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K), a federally funded longitudinal database recording the academic progress of over 21,000 students who began kindergarten in the 1998-99 school year and continue to the present. A multistage probability sampling technique was used. Since this study

focuses on schools rather than students, only school-level data from the project regarding the availability of gifted programs, urbanicity, and region were used. This means that the sample includes only those schools which have such data, which is taken from the first timepoint of collection, at the beginning of Fall 1998 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Analysis

The data were analyzed using chi-square by association. In order to explore the impact of urbanicity and SES on the number and percent of gifted programs in different regions, the data were grouped by SES and then by urbanicity before the analysis of gifted programs by census region (Northeast, West, South, and Midwest) was calculated, using SPSS's split-file option.

All the chi-squares were significant at the .05 level, indicating that urbanicity is a significant predictor of program participation within region and vice versa, even when controlling for SES.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis suggests that even when SES is accounted for, both region and location play a relevant role in distribution of gifted programs across region and urbanicity. The percentage values suggest that the federal mandate requiring Southern schools to employ gifted programs has in fact had an impact on their provision of services at the elementary level. Included were services in schools with a high number of low-SES students (almost a third of low-SES schools with gifted programs were in the South) indicating that mandated gifted programming does have an impact on provision of services to students in need.

On a larger scale, and even without the issue of the mandate, the fact that significant differences were found across regions and urbanities, even when SES was taken into account, suggests areas for further research. Other than differences in federal requirements, what are the reasons for regional differences in gifted program distribution?

How do regions impact differences in gifted program distribution by urbanicity? Why are schools in the large cities of one region more likely to have gifted program services than urban schools in another region?

This is a descriptive study and as such its research uses are primarily in support of or as background for further research. At a policy level, the study also provides useful information for those involved in gifted-education policy as to regions and settings which may be underserved, and also adds a new dimension to the existing research on the role of SES in availability of services for the gifted, as well as potentially providing practical information for parents and teachers of the gifted seeking to find gifted programs.

Since this research uses the ECLS-K data set, sampling should be less of a problem as the data are taken from a random sample of American schools. Unfortunately, the sample size has a negative consequence, in that significance can be inflated when using a large sample. The ECLS-K data, while providing information about SES and gifted programs as well as urbanicity and region, do not provide detailed information about the types of gifted programs. This information would be of use to gifted-education researchers and would support future studies of the differential impact of programs by region and urbanicity.

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