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# SIX MYTHS OF GIFTED EDUCATION THAT LEAD TO OVERLOOKING TALENTED MINORITY STUDENTS

***I***nequality in American public education looms large in gifted education nationwide. While approximately 49 percent of public school students are minority students, they make up only about 40 percent of those in programs for gifted students.

Tonya R. Moon, a professor in the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education, and colleagues Marcia A. Invernizzi, professor, and Catherine M. Brighton, associate dean and associate professor, are working to increase the number of underrepresented students in gifted programs.

With more than $400,000 in funding from the U.S. Department of Education for their latest project, called “Kaleidoscope,” the researchers aim to work with teachers and parents in 11 Virginia elementary schools to dispel myths about giftedness and instead see children through a different lens.

“There are absolutely exceptionally talented kids in underrepresented groups who we are missing,” Moon said.

Moon, Invernizzi and Brighton share six common myths about gifted education that are often at play when these children are overlooked.

• **Myth No. 1: Gifted kids are the smartest kids in class.**

*Brighton*: It may sound counter-intuitive, but gifted kids do not always present in a classroom as the smartest, most eager learners. One potential cause could be a mismatch between the child and the available learning opportunities. Very bright children are often bored in traditional public school settings that are typified by rote learning and decontextualized information. This boredom can manifest in gifted students as off-task behaviors, disengagement with the learning, or general school apathy. It stands to reason that students – even, and maybe especially, gifted kids – need to be engaged in the learning and have something to study that is worth engaging with so that they can demonstrate their potential.

• **Myth No. 2: All gifted kids show up to school gifted.**

*Brighton*: While we know “smartest” doesn’t automatically equal “gifted,” very often we expect the “smartest kids” to be those who come to school with more prior knowledge than peers and who demonstrate their abundant vocabulary. While these behaviors can suggest the potential for giftedness, more often this is a reflection of the environment the students experienced prior to entering kindergarten.

Children from impoverished backgrounds, for example, come to their first formal schooling experience having been exposed to 30 million fewer words than their more privileged peers. And sometimes this delay is just part of the developmental process for some children. For example, Albert Einstein was 4 years old before he spoke and age 7 before he could read.

The purpose of the Kaleidoscope project is to provide rich, literacy-focused experiences to all students in pre-K through grade 2 in hopes of “leveling the playing field” for students and to allow sufficient time for the varied developmental paths to even out prior to the formal gifted-identification process.

**• Myth No. 3: Giftedness is not something that can be developed. A student is either gifted or not.**

*Moon*: While there is much debate over how to define and ultimately measure giftedness, there is also much debate as to whether giftedness is innate (nature) or whether it can be developed (nurture). Therein lies one of the most pivotal questions in gifted education: Whether or not there exists a biological basis for giftedness.

For almost 150 years, the nature-versus-nurture debate surrounding giftedness has gone on. In the end, one’s potential is most likely due to complex interactions from many systems, some systems innate and others nurturing, and that high levels of attainment or achievement in any area can be achieved via multiple developmental pathways. For some individuals and for some areas, the pathway may rely more heavily on innate systems; for other people and other areas potential reached may rely more heavily upon external systems, such as environmental structures and experiences.

**• Myth** **No. 4:  All gifted students exhibit the same characteristics.**

*Brighton*: No two gifted children are alike and they will vary among themselves as much as they do from typically developing peers. While the gifts and talents of gifted learners do not manifest in the same ways or at the same rates, they are in fact children, regardless of their talent, and so teachers and parents can expect to see some unevenness in development among the various cognitive domains. For example, they might notice that a child might be quite exceptional in picking up sophisticated vocabulary, but have difficulty with fine motor skills or following routine procedures for organizing their belongings.

Early childhood teachers and parents can learn to observe the various needs of their children and make accommodations based on many of these different characteristics. Young gifted children may have advanced understanding and/or performance in a variety of different areas that will require the development of differentiated curriculum and educational interventions that are still sensitive to the developmental needs of these children.

*Invernizzi*: According to the National Association for Gifted Children, gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10 percent or rarer) in one or more structured areas of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

One feature of the Kaleidoscope project is working directly with parents and teachers to develop a growth-focused mindset about learners in hopes of helping parents and teachers understand the pivotal role they play in providing a rich environment.

• **Myth No. 5: All gifted kids need the same kind of classroom experience.**

*Brighton*: No two kids are alike, and that is true for gifted kids as well. And so it follows that these differences will mean that students won’t all respond to the same learning experiences the same ways.

Consequently, we designed the Kaleidoscope project to help teachers become more sensitive to the range of behaviors that are characteristic of gifted potential with the hopes that they will be less likely to overlook any child’s potential in the classroom.

They might see children who excel at memory-type activities beyond what might be expected at a given age level; or they might notice unusually rapid development when provided opportunities in the arts. Some children might learn new information or ways of doing things they are taught very quickly, while others might have a high need to change activities frequently and constantly seek novel opportunities to explore. Some may seek out older children as playmates and engage in especially creative, imaginative play scenarios, while others might demonstrate their creativity by constructing unusually complex things with their hands. Some children may vacillate between very sophisticated thinking and behaviors that indicate they are still very young children.

• **Myth No. 6: Most gifted students are being identified.**

*Moon*: For almost 50 years the American educational system has struggled to define giftedness. Even now, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of what it means to be gifted.

U.S. federal law provides some guidance by defining gifted students as those who perform or who show promise of performing at high levels in any of the following: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, visual/performing areas, creative or productive thinking, or leadership ability.

Even with this broad definition, there are no standard criteria for identifying gifted students, nor does the federal government provide funding or mandate for identifying and serving these students. The definition and the process of identification are left completely up to the individual states and districts. This lack of federal guidance or mandates result in a wide variety of definitions and identification procedures across states, with some not requiring any identification or programming for gifted students.

The latest Office of Civil Rights data from 2011-12 indicate that of the almost 3.2 million gifted students in the U.S., 60 percent of them are white with the remaining 40 percent represented by the following races and groups: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, black or African-American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, two or more races, students with disabilities, and English learners.

Several reasons contribute to gifted programs’ skewed population, but ultimately there appears to be one major cause: the achievement gap. African-Americans and Latinos are severely underrepresented among the top 1 percent, 5 percent and 10 percent on achievement measures, a common assessment type for gifted identification.

[**According to researchers**](http://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Estimations_2011_12), there exists a list of factors that could be named “educational malnourishment.” Such factors include lack of access to high-quality pre-school programming; poor-quality schools; low levels of parental involvement and expectation; lower teacher quality and expectation; negative peer influences; and poverty.

With our focus on pre-K classrooms, teachers and engaging parents, our Kaleidoscope project aims to combat that “educational malnourishment” with specific strategies and practices.