Next Steps: An Impetus for Future Directions in Research, Policy, and Practice for Low-Income Promising Learners

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You must be the change you wish to see in the world. --Mahatma Gandhi

One of the purposes of the National Leadership Conference on Low-Income Promising Learners was to determine what is known about promising students of poverty and to create a proactive research and policy agenda that includes directions for future initiatives related to this special population. Throughout the course of the conference, national leaders in the field of gifted education including state-level directors of gifted, researchers, specialized gifted education center personnel, K-12 leaders, and leaders from special foundations that focus on promising students of poverty met as part of a think-tank to discuss implications of current research and next steps within the field of gifted education. Four discussion groups were intentionally divided by geography and occupation so that a broad range of perspectives would enhance discussion.

Each group was charged with discussion of the following four topics related to promising students of poverty:

- identification and access to services,
- value-added interventions and strategies,
- transition and retention issues, and
- other related topics of importance.

Groups reflected upon each category by answering the following questions: (1) What have we learned? (2) What are the implications for state and local policies? and (3) What are the future directions for research? Data from each group were collated and categorically analyzed. Where two or more groups agreed on a set of ideas, they were included as thematic findings. The following section includes the group findings and implications for the field of gifted education.

Identification/Access to Services

It has been well documented that students of poverty and minority students are underrepresented in gifted programs. Due to their unique experiences, varied environments, and minimal acculturation to middle class values, typical assessment procedures under-identify these students. Moreover, state and local policies, identification procedures, and assessment measures need to be modified to capture the unique experiences and talents of these students. Empirical data specific to the identification of low-income, promising students is increasing in the literature on gifted and talented learners. This category encompasses a majority of the studies for which several generalizable findings

may be ascertained. Research-based identification practices for low-income, promising learners include the following:

1. Begin identification processes early in the child's school career. Pre-school and Kindergarten identification may trigger earlier intervention services, exposure to enriched environments, and advanced content. This proactive approach ensures that these promising students are exposed to an environment that is conducive to developing their potential talent areas and could enhance future educational growth that may not have otherwise been developed or noticed.

2. Provide dynamic and authentic assessment for students who have potential but need more school exposure to higher level content and processes before their giftedness is manifest in measurable ways. This includes pre-teaching components prior to testing, the use of exemplars for assessing performance, and the measurement of growth over time through the use of portfolios, behavior checklists, real-world, problem-based approaches, and performance-based measures.

3. Ensure that identification is ongoing. Multiple chances for entrance into gifted services are necessary. Students of poverty may need continued school exposure to a variety of content areas and higher level thinking skills before being identified or before they are able to thrive in a specialized gifted program. Also, these students may be more transient or absent from school when compared to other populations and consequently may miss key assessment opportunities if assessment is not ongoing.

4. Identification must be accessible to all students. Access to identification is critical to the receipt of services. However, many school systems rely heavily on teacher or parent recommendation as the gatekeepers to identification and service. Many times students of poverty go unnoticed and may not have the opportunity to be assessed. Therefore, assessments or screening procedures for each child in the district should be considered at key times throughout the school year so all students have equal chances for gifted service consideration.

5. Use valid and reliable instrumentation. Validity and reliability of assessment instruments is of greater concern when identifying special populations of promising learners in poverty. Teacher or parent checklists, portfolios, and other created assessments must be piloted and only used after acceptable technical

adequacy is determined. Similarly, highly marketed standardized assessments should be examined, not only for acceptable reliability and validity, but also for relevant sampling data on the designated population.

6. Include multiple measures and assessments as part of an overall identification system. There has been some controversy regarding carte blanche administration of nonverbal assessments as a means for identifying special populations of gifted, low-income or minority students. While the research on the use of nonverbal assessment measures for identification of low-income populations is promising, such tests should never be used as the sole criterion for program consideration. The use of multiple measures, with a nonverbal measure being one of them constitutes a stronger identification system. However, there is not a "one-size-fits-all" assessment to identify low-income promising learners.

7. Provide professional development and training for parents and teachers to better identify promising learners in poverty. Many times parents of these students are reticent to consent to assessment or special programming for their children. Sometimes there is mistrust between the school and the family. Moreover, many classroom teachers and pre-service teachers do not have the training to identify potentially gifted students from low-income and/or minority backgrounds. However, with training, both parents and teachers can improve their skills in this area.

Institutionalizing the identification process for promising learners in poverty is a challenging task for school administrators, teachers, and researchers. There are multiple implications and questions educators who work with these students must consider. Do the definitions, philosophies, policies, and service models complement or discriminate against promising students of poverty? How do the state and local policies and funding mechanisms for gifted need to change to accurately identify and include these students for services?

Screening and identifying all students using alternative and multiple measures over time may be time-consuming and costly. Are there effective and efficient instruments and procedures districts can use for the identification of promising learners? To what extent should districts consider local assessment norms and demographics? How well do the currently identified gifted student demographics match the overall district demographics?

Finally, after these students are identified, how do services match the identification model? Identified minority and low-income students may drop out of gifted programs that do not fit the way they

were identified or are not attuned to their strengths. Adjustments in services need to be made as part of systemic changes and multiple ways of assessing these students for advanced programs.

Value-Added Interventions and Strategies
Value-added interventions are also complicated to decipher in terms of strategies and programs that work. Educators must be cautious not to over-generalize specific study findings as many studies are small in scope and limited to a certain population, grade level, or demographic of low-income, promising students. Database searches of empirical studies specific to gifted or promising students who are low income are also more limited than data on regular, special education, or minority students of poverty.

Still, there are a few value-added approaches that permeate the literature specific to low-income, promising learners that were discussed by the groups as promising strategies:

1. Ongoing mentoring by counselors, teachers, and researchers to provide educational and social support structures for low-income promising students *and their families* positively impacts academic success, social skills, and student efficacy.

2. Proactive, targeted career and guidance counseling for low-income, promising students *and their families* positively impacts low-income students' selection of rigorous high school courses and post-secondary enrollment at selective universities.

3. After school, extra-curricular, Saturday, and summer enrichment programs, especially in mathematics and science, are found to positively affect college application, attendance rates in school, entrance into advanced courses and overall academic achievement.

4. Well-designed school-based interventions that include advanced and enriched curriculum opportunities also have demonstrated learning gains in critical areas for this population.

Additional research is necessary specific to value-added interventions with low-income, promising students so that policies and practices may be enhanced. Data available from general education studies on low-income learners may or may not be relevant to gifted students. For example, data on resiliency factors, social skills, scaffolding, bridging, teacher and family impact, and early-intervention models are included in much of the literature for low-income minority, and lower-ability students; studies in these areas specific to low-income, gifted students need to be conducted. Moreover, studies in gifted education need to be examined and replicated

to include the impact of specific interventions on low-income, promising students.

Most conference attendees suggested that the following "specificity question" be examined as a priority: What types of interventions are most effective with different types of students, under which circumstances, and in what doses? More needs to be known about how existing interventions work with students of poverty. Likewise, more experimental studies that include specific, replicable interventions at given times and lengths throughout a student's school career should be examined. A unanimous finding of all groups was that the field of gifted education be more deliberate in providing large-scale research studies when planning interventions so that findings reveal generalizable solutions.

It has been established that family and community resources facilitate talent development for students of poverty. Talent development models and studies need to include the impact of internal and external factors that positively (and negatively) impact low-income promising students. Internal factors may include resiliency, self-esteem, efficacy, personality, and motivation; while external factors for future study may include family and community support systems, school supports, school culture, and support. Within the category of external factors of talent development, additional questions need to be answered including: How does school culture influence low-income gifted learners? Which types of teachers are most effective with these students? What do effective teachers do that is distinctive for low-income promising students?

School leadership is another area for future study on these issues. How can school leaders affect positive change for low-income promising learners? Which general education school reform efforts have the greatest impact on these students? Although some of these questions have been studied in general education, results for promising students of poverty have not been obtained.

Moreover, analysis of group discussions in this area suggests that longitudinal studies, retrospective studies, studies in conjunction with other fields, as well as more timely national studies should be considered by those conducting research in order to gain a broader perspective and collective knowledge in the field regarding effective interventions for this unique population.

Transition and Retention for Promising Students of Poverty

Transitions to different grade levels or schools are difficult on many students. Promising students of poverty are at an even greater risk, especially if school districts do not have appropriate articulation among schools and building personnel. Sanders & Horn (1998) extensively examined student achievement scores in the state of Tennessee and found a significant decrease in student performance whenever a student changed buildings and moved to the lowest grade in that building. The most significant decrease in achievement occurred during the elementary to middle school transition. Although data were not disaggregated for at-risk populations of poverty, they were included in the overall sample. Another study suggests that attrition is common among minority students identified to receive gifted education services (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). The authors speculate that this lack of retention is attributed to prejudices of teachers and students, lack of parental involvement, lower expectations from teachers and guidance counselors, and peer pressure from other minority students who were not identified as gifted.

One study specific to students of poverty who were also gifted examined ongoing attendance versus attrition rates of low-income students participating in a summer enrichment program (Woods, 2006). This study suggests that the earlier a student starts in the enrichment program and the more adept a student's skills in reasoning and language skills are upon entrance, the more likely she is to remain in the program over time. Also, poor Hispanic males with large families remained in the program longer than other groups; and students with a female head of household were the most likely to quit. Another study examining gifted program attrition form a university-based context found that adult and peer relationships were a critical variable affecting low-income students' continued participation (Johnsen, Feuerbacher, & Witte, 2007).

Renzulli & Park (2000) examined reasons gifted students dropped out of high school. Most gifted dropouts were from low income and minority groups, had less educated parents, and indicated a lack of desire for high educational attainment. Pregnancy was also a factor for females.

Suggestions for policies and future research in this area were numerous from the groups. For example:
- What types of articulation policies and record keeping systems are in place for district and community personnel to communicate more effectively across grade levels and buildings?
- What types of advocacy initiatives work for these students?

- Which support systems are most effective for retention in school and in gifted programs, especially during transition years?
- What are the risk factors associated with attrition and drop-out rates of low-income promising students?
- What is the cost of inaction at various transition points?
- How do the needs of rural and urban students of poverty differ?
- Which interventions are most effective during which transitional years?
- Which support systems are necessary for transient students among varied school districts and states?

In this area, in particular, an emphasis on forming partnerships with agencies and fields outside of gifted education for the purposes of conducting research was discussed as an important direction to take. Specific suggestions included (1) setting up a national database of low-income gifted students and (2) drafting sample policies that would positively impact access to educational opportunities at key stages of development.

Related Issues of Importance

Participants attending the conference were also asked to articulate additional issues they were concerned about related to promising learners in poverty. Pursuant topics of importance included advocacy efforts, building partnerships with families, professional development, pre-service teacher education, societal bias, discrepancies in definitions of gifted within the field, the impact of policies specific to this population, funding formulas in education, and strategies for the dissemination of research to those who work with these students.

- Questions raised that were representative of these categories included the following: How do schools build trust with low-income families?
- How can educators and researchers give families in poverty a larger voice for accessing educational opportunities?
- How do we help families of low-income promising students accept the services that may be provided?
- What can be done about regression during the summer months for low-income, promising students who are not in summer school?
- What types of professional development are effective for teachers and administrators working with this population?
- What types of teacher preparation programs are needed to prepare teachers to work with this

group?
- What are the indicators of quality?
- How can study findings on these learners be disseminated to the teachers and schools who need the information the most?
- How can state education funding formulas better provide resources to schools, students, and families that need them the most?
- What can NAGC do to lead in policy making and dissemination of research initiatives and findings?

The issue of poverty is larger than the field of gifted education. How can those in the field of gifted education partner with other groups outside the field to better serve promising students of poverty? How do the different definitions, philosophies, and belief systems in gifted education impact services and practices for promising students of poverty? How can technological advances be used to create national databases on gifted education for research, dissemination, and tracking of transient students of poverty?

Next Steps: Where Do We Go From Here?

Darwin wrote that "If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin." Institutions of learning and those involved with impacting the lives of low-income students have an awesome task in promoting the talent development of these learners.

Recognition of an issue is the first step toward action that can bring about change. Examining personal bias, revisiting definitions, philosophies, and beliefs about gifted, and being able to recognize talent in all types of students are important introspective steps toward addressing the needs of this underrepresented population. In addition, several action steps may be taken by state-level personnel, researchers, national leaders, foundations, and other educators to catalyze efforts on behalf of these learners.

1. Educators and researchers in gifted education need to be more proactive in collaborating with local, state, and national level organizations and foundations that focus on students of poverty in order to maximize efforts, including joint research studies, reports, conferences, and service provisions. Dissemination efforts on findings specific to these students should include a national audience and yet target local school district level teachers in each state. Researchers in gifted education need to move beyond gifted education audiences for presentation and dissemination of work in this area. Similarly, researchers from other fields should be invited to work in collaboration with gifted education and present at gifted education conferences.

A special strand at the National Association for Gifted Children Annual Convention may include a targeted focus on promising students of poverty with an emphasis on the findings from this monograph.

2. Model policies for use at state and local levels need to be developed to ensure equitable practices for identification and service of promising learners in poverty. Likewise, policies that are exclusive or discriminatory to this population need to be dismantled.

3. Exemplary program models, Pre-K-16, that posit a systemic approach to identification and services for promising learners in poverty need to be developed and disseminated to state and local education constituencies. These models should include technical adequacy data on instrumentation and services at various levels of development and appropriate transitions throughout a child's school career.

4. A focus on more sophisticated research related to promising learners in poverty needs to be conducted, including longitudinal studies and studies developed from national databases. Researchers must be able to tease out critical variables of interest so that the field can better understand not only what works but also how it works. Researchers in gifted education also need to provide linkages to studies in areas such as counseling, cognitive science, and psychology. Not only will such partnerships provide insight into other issues related to barriers and effective practices when working with promising students of poverty, but a larger audience may be reached through these partnerships that will inform more individuals about the issues of giftedness and poverty, which should result in better advocacy efforts and a larger voice for these students and their families.

5. School districts need to recruit a more diverse population of educators, including educators from low-income schools and those from various minority groups and train them to work effectively with promising students of poverty. Institutions of higher education need to enhance recruitment efforts for such teachers. Moreover, districts need to focus on professional development and pre-service teacher training specific to promising learners in poverty and of color.

6. An emphasis on family education and involvement is critical to the enterprise of talent development in these learners. Schools and researchers should collaborate with the families of students to promote success and help develop talent. The culture of poverty is one that embraces strong family loyalties and relationships. Thus, schools need to work within this framework to better assist students and their families

in accessing appropriate educational opportunities. This may include individual learning plans for families and students with access to daily sustenance needs, mentors, and other social outlets that will enhance student ability and provide the necessary curricular and extra-curricular opportunities.

The pursuit of equity, excellence, and collaboration are key components critical to positive outcomes for promising students of poverty. Equitable access to programs and school opportunities are the first steps in providing excellence in education for this unique population. Advanced curriculum, high expectations, and extra-curricular options also enhance talent development. Collaboration with families, researchers, and other educators regarding students of poverty within and across schools, districts, and states is a necessary component for change. Finally, our educational institutions must be active participants in enhancing talent development.

Because gifted education is at the nexus of equity and excellence arguments in schools, we must redouble our efforts to sustain the dual agendas of raising the mean performance level for all learners, even as we target resources to increase the variability at high levels of performance among gifted learners who require additional support to optimize their learning potential.

Closing Thoughts

In her closing remarks to conference participants, NAGC President Joyce VanTassel-Baska reiterated many of the observations made by speakers and participants throughout the conference by summarizing them as major themes that emerged from the two-day meeting.

One such theme was the central role of *early and sustained intervention* that considers the relative importance of both cognitive and social-emotional development. Within a cognitive development framework, the provision of rigorous, advanced content-based curriculum opportunities was crucial to the accrual of educational advantage over time. The role of both in-school and out of school opportunities working together to enhance learning was viewed as optimal.

A second theme centered on the need for *personalized experiences that provided the social support network* of relationships for these students deemed essential to the activation of talent development processes. The role of family members, teachers, and mentors were seen to be important aspects of that social support system. Teachers, in particular, were viewed as critical to the process in several ways: as gatekeepers for identification,

as models of adults who accept and nurture individual differences, and as facilitators of targeted learning opportunities. Individual learning plans represent one strategy for collaboration among these stakeholders in the lives of students from poverty.

A third theme that resonated throughout the conference presentations was the need for *systematic institutional responses* to the issues of finding and serving low income, promising students. Universities and other institutions in the community need to target a research, development, and outreach agenda to learn more about what interventions work with these learners to produce positive educational attainment and life productivity. State education agencies and local school districts need to develop policies and underlying procedures for implementing research-based practices of identification and service delivery to these learners and dismantle existing policies and practices that prohibit access. Educational institutions and organizations like NAGC need to work together to effect the deepest and most sustaining change for these students.

Because gifted education is at the nexus of equity and excellence arguments in schools, we must redouble our efforts to sustain the dual agendas of raising the mean performance level for all learners, even as we target resources to increase the variability at high levels of performance among gifted learners who require additional support to optimize their learning potential.

May this action agenda be taken to heart by all who read it and care deeply about the talent development of all students of promise.

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