

REMOVING THE MASK: GIFTEDNESS IN POVERTY

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*I*ntroduction

Dear Reader,

When I first read Ruby Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, I knew I had found some labels and explanations for things that I had personally and professionally experienced in my life. Having worked in the field of gifted education for many years, I also knew that many school districts have struggled to identify gifted and potentially gifted students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Over the years I have read the literature and listened to a variety of consultants on meeting the needs of gifted students from diverse backgrounds. For every proposed answer, there seemed to be "Yes, but..." followed by five more questions.

As Dr. Payne has conducted workshops across the United States on the subject of poverty, she has been questioned repeatedly about gifted students from poverty. She shared this information with me and suggested that we pursue it. Having worked in a school district with a diverse population, I knew the difficulties in identifying gifted students from diverse backgrounds. I too had struggled with the identification process, as well as keeping the students in the program once they were identified.

Having the opportunity to be a curriculum auditor, doing evaluations of gifted programs in a variety of school districts, and having done a dissertation on achieving and non-achieving kindergarten students by doing home visits, I also knew that equity was a key issue. School districts, under the guise of fairness, were omitting their students from poverty in the gifted program while increasing their numbers of students

from poverty in other special programs. Opportunities in the home environment were not there, and yet students were being assessed as though they were all from middle-class America. In working with Dr. Payne, I found the pieces of the puzzle coming together. This work is a first step in looking at students' gifts and talents in a context of opportunities afforded within the home environment. Their giftedness is shaped differently and, therefore, must be examined differently. The gifted from poverty do not come to school with middle-class experiences and values; programs thus must be adjusted to accommodate the experiences and values that are fostered in the culture of poverty. This work addresses two major questions:

1. How do I identify gifted students from low socioeconomic environments?
2. Once the district has identified them, how do school officials design and implement programs that will meet these students' needs and keep them in the program?

Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty is for the practicing professional who is committed to finding and serving the best and the brightest from the culture of poverty.

Paul D. Slocumb, Ed.D.



Chapter One: The Paradigm

Rick
Age: 10

Rick lives with his grandmother and his twin brother Mick in a suburb of a major city. The two boys have been living with their grandmother since they were 11 months old. Their father is her son. According to Grandma, "He sees the boys when he feels like it—usually once or twice a month." The father gives no financial support. Rick's mother lives in the city. She sees Rick and his brother once or twice a year. The boys usually spend a night or two with her when she comes to get them.

Rick's grandmother works at a local hospital in the housekeeping department. She completed the 9th grade in school. She makes approximately \$14,500 a year. She has worked at the hospital for 11 years. She receives food stamps and Medicaid. Both of these benefits are to end this year. She says there are too many forms to be completed (to keep the food stamps and Medicaid) that she couldn't fill out. Rick and his brother participate in the free-lunch program at school.

Rick has been in the same school for more than two years. He attends an extended-day class to help him improve his grades and performance on the state competency test. The program is funded with Title I money. He started kindergarten when he was 5. He was retained in 3rd grade.

No adult men live in the household. Rick's grandmother is the only adult female in the household. Rick has regular chores at home. He does the dishes each night. His bedtime is 9 p.m. on school nights. On weekends he is allowed to stay up until 2 or 3 a.m. watching television. It is his "payback" for the 9 p.m. bedtime during the school week. Rick has never spent the night more than 50 miles away from home.

The small house in which the three live is decorated in neutral tones. Rick and his brother have some books, but they are books for younger children. No newspapers or magazines are received in the home. His grandmother does speak in formal register. Rick is a member of the dominant ethnic and economic group on his school campus.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE PARADIGM



*"There's nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals."
-Felix Frankfurter, U.S. Supreme Court Justice*

When an identification process imposes criteria on students as though they all come to school having had the same opportunities, they are being treated equally. They are not, however, being treated equitably.

Equal: "as great as; the same as; like or alike in quantity, degree, value; of the same rank, ability, merit; evenly proportioned or balanced" (p. 481).

Equity: "the quality of being fair or impartial; that which is fair and just; the application of the dictates of conscience or the principles of natural justice to the settlement of controversies" (p. 482).

-Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, (1997)

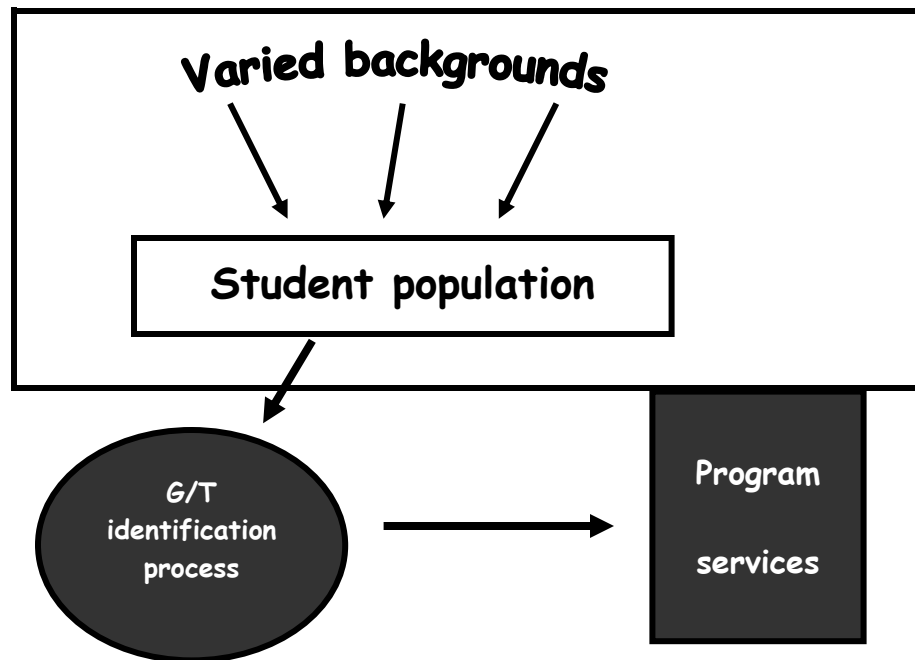
In most public-school settings, students must meet an arbitrarily set, minimum birth-date range in order to start school, and readiness to learn is a non-issue. Students in a public-school setting rarely come to school equally equipped to learn. Yet school systems make the assumption that all of them are ready to begin the learning process at the same point. Programs such as prekindergarten and Head Start readily acknowledge that students in fact do not come to school equally equipped to learn. These programs, however, are not mandatory. Therefore, students from poverty enter public school and are placed side by side with students whose backgrounds are much more advantaged.

Treating all students equally in the identification of gifted students all too often results in the extreme under-identification of an entire segment of the student population who come to school quite "unequal."

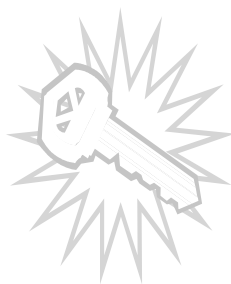


These "unequals" enter a system governed by an unwritten code calling for all students to be alike. At first, this practice appears to be not only fair but ideal.

Treating all students equally, however, results in singular identification processes. Gifted/talented identification processes are one example that, to varying degrees, disregards the backgrounds of the students. Once identified, the students enter a singular program design that ignores the multiplicity of factors that have contributed to the differences in the students themselves. This disregard of differences creates inequity.



Equity in programs designed to identify and serve potentially gifted/talented students is two-pronged. The first prong is the identification process. The second prong is in the program design—that is, the manner in which the identified gifted students from poverty receive services once the students are identified.



Gifted/talented students from poverty cannot be identified or served as though they were from non-poverty households.

To identify gifted students from poverty necessitates educators including in the identification process those environmental factors that contribute to the students' readiness to learn. After the identification process has occurred, schools must structure services for those students in a manner commensurate with their needs. Not addressing both of these issues results in inequity.

Generally, in the identification process a criterion exists to assess students' abilities in relationship to those criteria. The educators identify those who meet the criteria; the identified students enter the program for the gifted/talented and begin receiving services. Most of these identification processes for gifted/talented programs are highly competitive. This is so because of the following:

1. The process is designed to select an identified number of students from the larger population using criteria that are heavily dependent on standardized test scores.
2. Students who come from economically advantaged households usually score better on standardized tests because they have more access to abstract language within the home environment.
3. Parents who come from middle- and upper-middle-income households are usually goal-oriented, wanting more educational and financial opportunities for themselves and their children.

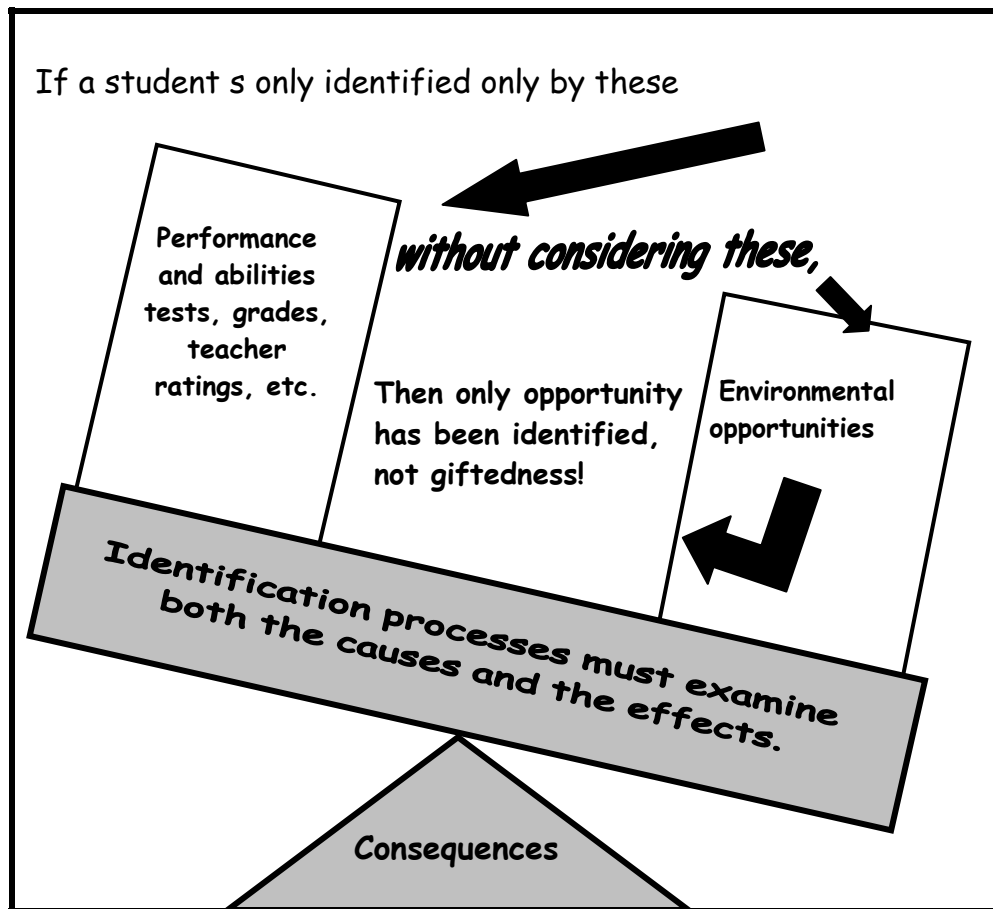


AND

4. Parents perceive that the **best teachers** are **teaching the best students** in the **best program** and **"I want the best for my child."**

Identifying students in this manner may appear to be equal, but it is not equitable. What educators ultimately identify is not giftedness but rather opportunity.

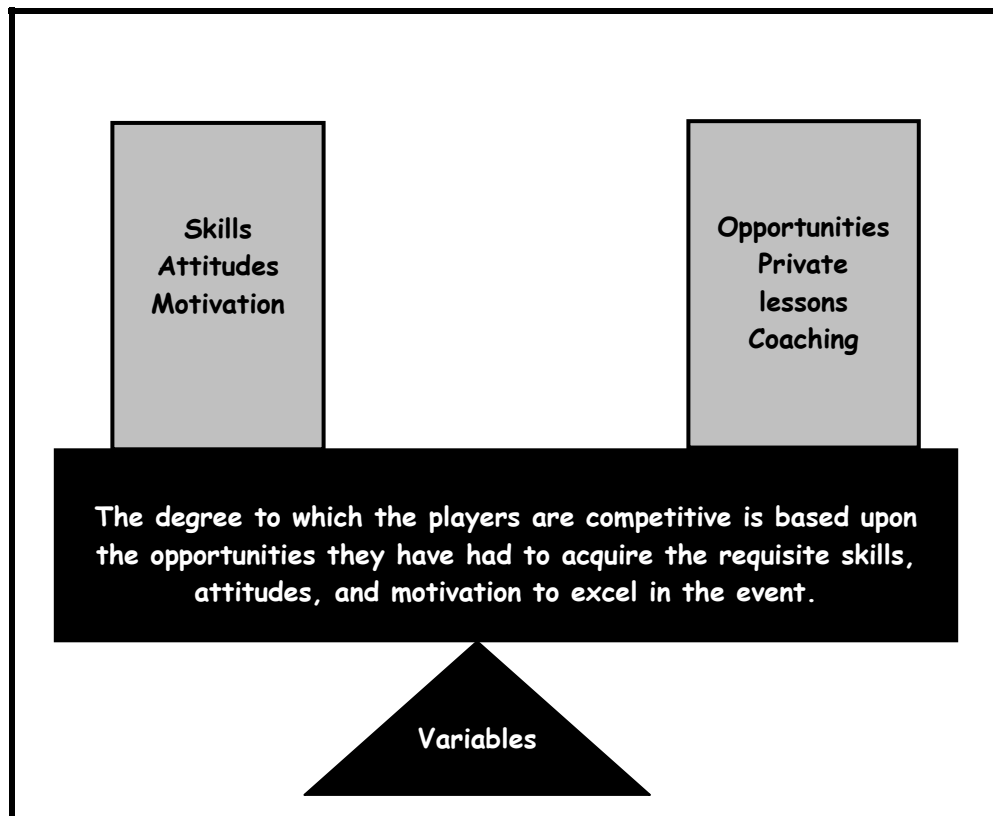
By not examining students' foundational experiences, the effect of such foundational experiences gets assessed without looking at the causes. It is essential to examine the underlying causes and effects of those learning, social, and emotional behaviors as masked and observed in school.



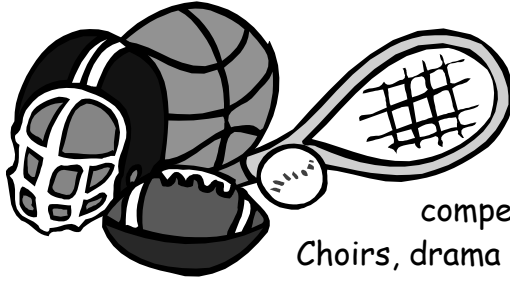
Treating individuals differently in order to establish equity is not new. Competitive sports events have long acknowledged the need for equity. Golfers have handicapping scores. Women golfers have "red tees" that reduce the distance between the tee and the green. Female basketball players use a smaller basketball than the one that male basketball players use.

Competitive-performance events attempt to level the playing field in order to achieve equity. Students who receive private music lessons may find themselves in the symphonic

band while those who do not have the private lessons are only skilled enough, by comparison, to be in concert band. Symphonic bands compete against only other symphonic bands. The following diagram depicts this process.



Foundational opportunities greatly impact the skills, attitudes, and motivation of the competitors. These factors, however, are not the sole elements that dictate the category in which they compete. In events in which size and gender are significant factors in the competition, competitors are placed in categories with comparable players. For example, weightlifters, boxers, and wrestlers



compete with those of like gender and size. A heavyweight does not compete with a middleweight.

Choirs, drama groups, and bands from high schools with small enrollments compete with one another while students in large schools also compete with one another.

Competitive events that don't account for differences in gender, physical size, or physical strength of the players are those events in which size, gender, and strength are not a factor. Skeet competition allows men and women to compete with one another because it is the power of the gun and the accuracy of the shooter that are the critical elements—not size, gender, or physical strength of the competitor. The power of the racecar or the strength of the horse is a factor so significant that it makes the person driving the car or riding the horse of lesser consequence, comparatively speaking.

Typically, identification processes for the gifted/talented do pit students from more advantaged backgrounds against students from less advantaged backgrounds, even though the opportunities within the students' environment make them unequal. Identical treatment of unequals in this situation produces a system that is inequitable.

Identifying the Inequities

Before the identification paradigm can shift from equal to equity, educators must identify and address the sources of

the inequity. The sources of the inequity for students from poverty are rooted in the home and the resources available to the student. Having access to resources increases the probability that young children will perform better in school. The presence of these resources within the home environment is vital to the students' skills, attitudes, and motivation. The resources that are pivotal to this development appear below. A more detailed discussion of each of these resource categories is included in the next chapter.

RESOURCES

- **Financial**
- **Emotional**
- **Mental**
- **Spiritual**
- **Physical**
- **Support systems**
- **Relationships/role models**
- **Knowledge of hidden rules**

(Discussion of these resources is included in Chapter Two and also in Payne, 1998, p. 16.)

These resources, or the lack thereof, contribute significantly to the opportunities that students do or do not have in their early, formative years. Impoverished backgrounds contribute to lesser skill and lower production levels. This "lack of" is clearly exhibited and most definitively judged in school settings.

Poverty is "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (Payne, 1998, p. 16). This lack of resources sets the stage for the variations and differences one sees in students. When identifying the potentially gifted student, this lack of resources frequently manifests itself in students through the following:

- Score lower on standardized test.
- Behave differently from their peers from middle-class households.
- Appear unmotivated, lacking goals and planning skills.
- Lack social skills necessary to resolve conflicts.
- Lack many skills that society regards as basic academic skills.

Educators not understanding the causes behind these symptoms tend to exclude bright students coming out of poverty for consideration as potentially gifted students. Their brightness is often hidden behind the mask of poverty. Traditionally, most identification processes for the gifted do not look beyond the mask. The mask becomes a "What you see is what you get" scenario.

Screening all students as if they have had backgrounds that are equal ignores the factors that have contributed to the vast differences that impact their lives.



Competitive events acknowledge the differences between the competitors where clearly agreed-upon factors can unfairly skew the competition in favor of one over another. Recognition of the same inequity must be

applied to any process in which children are identified for a program intended to serve their specific needs. This modification of process, be it gifted identification or a boxing division, brings equity to the competition. How can a student from an impoverished background possibly compete with the student who has had the resources to attend quality preschool programs; travel; and have access to children's books, computers, and educational toys?

Equity does not eliminate the student who comes from an advantaged background. It does, however, allow for the student who comes from the disadvantaged background to compete for inclusion on a team that limits the number of team members.

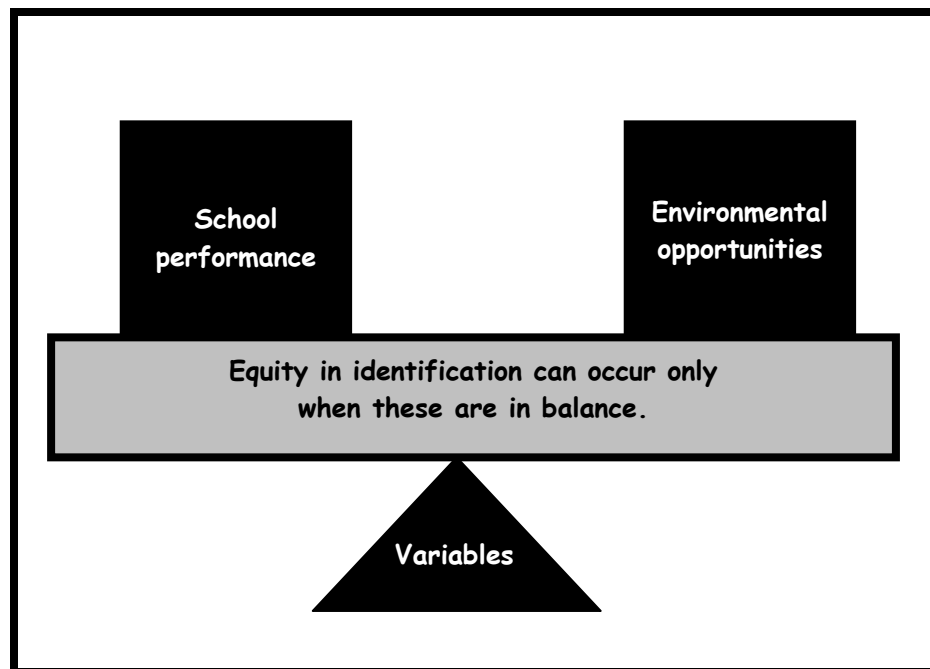
An appropriate way to check systemically for equity is for a school district to do the following:

- Ascertain the percentage of identified gifted/talented students who are from low socioeconomic and non-low socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Compare those percentages to the overall percentages in the larger school population.

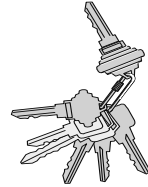
In other words, if 60% of the students on a campus come from low-income families, then approximately 55 to 65% of the identified gifted students should be from low-income families. The numbers represented within the identified gifted/talented population should be relatively proportionate to the larger school population. Vastly disproportionate representation from the "free and reduced lunch" population and non-"free and reduced lunch" population identified as

gifted/talented would be an indicator that the identification process lacks equity.

For educators to change this paradigm and achieve equity, they must consider the differences between the students from poverty and those from environments with more opportunities. Only then can equity in the identification process become a reality. After schools address the equity issue, they must address the issue of services. If schools continue to design services as though one size fits all, then schools will not achieve a fully equitable program for gifted/talented students.



The Challenge



To address the needs of the gifted from poverty, schools must:

- Develop and adopt an identification process that considers the environmental opportunities of the students.
- Develop a program and instructional design that acknowledges and addresses the differences between gifted students from poverty and non-poverty households.