

Perceptions of Three Gifted Hispanic and Pueblo Adults from Northern New Mexico of their own Giftedness: Social Identity, and School Retention Issues

Rose Chiovitti-Cavalcante
Northern New Mexico College

Abstract

In this phenomenological study, three gifted Hispanic and Pueblo adults from northern New Mexico were interviewed in depth. The goal was to understand how their social identities and context influenced their perceptions of giftedness and how it might have influenced their performance in school and retention in the gifted programs. The findings seem to indicate a need for early identification of these minority children and schools and programs that respect and incorporate local social and cultural values and issues into their curriculum. A lack of identification with school's academic values, which they feel are removed from their reality and culture, might prevent gifted Pueblo and Hispanic students from staying and being successful in school. Participants tended to explain their school achievement based either on nurture or effort, rather than innate ability. This information could be useful for counselors and teachers as they advise these students. Finally, low expectations seem to be a factor preventing Hispanic and Pueblo students in the region to engage more fully in the formal educational process.

Introduction

A persistent dilemma in education is the under-representation of minority students in gifted education (Ford, 1998; Baldwin, 1985; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Plummer, 1995; Worrell, 2003). Authors have suggested that the problem is partially due to the use of traditional IQ tests and to the lack of teacher referral of minority students for gifted education programs (Ford et al, 2008, Peterson, 1999).

Ford & Moore (2004) reported, however, that retention of minority students in gifted programs has been a neglected issue when considering under-representation. Issues related to retention usually fall in three categories: a) students' social-emotional needs (Harmon, 2002); b) concerns regarding their happiness and sense of belonging in gifted programs (Huff et al, 2005); and c) underachievement (Ford, 1996).

Studies (Shaunessy, 2007; Pizarro, 2005) have demonstrated that identity factors also play a central role in minority students' school experiences and performance. For instance, recent research has highlighted the relationship between social identity and academic achievement (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Oyserman et al., 2003).

Social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). It includes both the aspects of racial and ethnic identities. People's racial identity is exemplified by how one perceives and adapts to the social and political experiences as a person of a particular racial group. In the other hand, ethnic identity reflects the connection that individuals have with other people of their same racial group, the acknowledgment that they share cultural elements and experiences. The distinction between racial and ethnic identities is very subtle and the terms are usually used interchangeably. Ogbu (1978, 1989, 1998) has argued that some minority groups may develop a social identity in opposition to mainstream society, leading to difficulty to fully engage in education.

Only a few studies have focused on gifted Hispanic students' perceptions of giftedness. One study in this area was conducted by Shaunessy et al (2007). They looked at the experiences of bilingual Latino students in gifted and general education and found that their culture and language influenced their reactions to being gifted.

Peterson (1999) conducted a qualitative study where she analyzed the definitions of giftedness given by Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, and low-income Anglos as they nominated individuals for a hypothetical gifted program. The results indicated that Latino and American Indian individuals' understanding of giftedness differed significantly from the mainstream culture. Latinos tended to identify giftedness as artistic ability (as a means of self-expression), humility, and spontaneous community service. Native Americans had difficulty defining giftedness since it represented hierarchy for them and that is a foreign concept in their culture. When finally able to talk about it, they identified giftedness with the ability to know traditional practices, to blend different cultures, and perform in music and dance. The results indicated that the concept of giftedness "seem to be bound by individuals' context".

The Context

Northern New Mexico is culturally and geographically rich. The land includes harsh deserts, vast grasslands, irrigated valleys, and high mountains. About half of the population lives in small metropolitan areas along the Rio Grande and the other half is thinly scattered across vast spaces. Pueblo Indians and Hispanics are the majority in this land, comprising almost 90% of the population (US Census Bureau, 2000). The Hispanic population (about 70%) includes families whose ancestors migrated to the place centuries ago and some who have recently immigrated to the United States. The Pueblo Indian population (about 13%) lives mostly in Pueblos (reservations) scattered along the banks of the Rio Grande River (US Census Bureau, 2000). Most people of Northern New Mexico are descendents of agrarian-based societies who are fiercely proud of their history, cultures, communities, and the land.

Many communities in central northern New Mexico are poor and the rate of unemployment is one of the highest in the country (ER&A, 2010). Measures of children's well being rank New Mexico in the 43rd place (Kids Count, 2008), with the northern part of the state ranking even lower. The history of the region, the scattered population, the shifting economy, the ethnic diversity, and the pervasive poverty found in central northern New Mexico directly affect not only the quality of educational practices in the area but also how students perceive their education and their identities in relation to it.

While several studies may have been conducted on how social and ethnic identities of Hispanic (Arroyo, & Ziegler, 1995; Pizarro, 2005) and Native American (Bowker, 1992) students affect their academic achievement, caution is needed in any attempt to directly apply those results to groups of students of same ethnic background but located in different geographical regions. Pizarro (2005), who has written on racial profiling and identity among Chicano groups in Los Angeles and Acoma, affirms that there is a "tremendous diversity of Chicana/o population" and reminds his readers that "some pockets of the Chicana/o community may not be represented in these students' experiences" (p.14).

The present study tries to understand the perceptions of giftedness, and the experiences and development of social and academic identities of three gifted Hispanic and Pueblo adults in central northern New Mexico.

Method

Identity development researchers have pointed out the importance of conducting studies using a qualitative methodology due to the complexity of the issue at hand (Arce, 1981). Quantitative methodologies usually limit the researcher's ability to deeply understand the issue because the labels frequently used in quantitative research are unreliable determinants of how individuals understand their own identities (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1999).

The aim of this research study was to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, remaining true to the facts and capturing the complexity of the subjects' perceptions. In order to accomplish this goal, a phenomenological research approach was chosen. According to Welman & Kruger (1999, p.189), "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of the people involved".

Participants

According to Hycner (1999, p. 156), "the phenomenon dictates the method including the type and the number of participants. Boyd (2001) regards two to ten participants as sufficient for a phenomenological study. For this study, three Hispanic and Pueblo adults who had been identified as gifted either in middle or high school were interviewed, since they had "had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988, p.150). Subjects were current or past students of a college in central northern New Mexico where the researcher was an instructor.

One subject, Ana, was 30 years old, married with two children. Her mother was Anglo and her father a Pueblo Indian man. Ana was raised in a small rural Hispanic community in northern New Mexico. Ana was, at the time of the study, in her third year of a BA program in Elementary Education and planned to pursue her Masters' degree when she finished college.

Jose, was a 32 year old Hispanic male, also married with two children. He was raised in a small rural Hispanic community in northern New Mexico. Jose, has received two Associate degrees, one in Fine Arts and another in Computer Technology, from the same local college. At the time he was interviewed, he worked in a school district as a computer technician.

Emily was a 30 year old Pueblo Indian female who was raised in a small pueblo in northern New Mexico. She was married with one child. At the time of the study, she was in her fourth year of a BA program in Elementary Education and intended to work as a teacher in her pueblo.

Emily and Ana were contacted through the college and Jose was indicated as a possible subject by one of the other participants in a "snowball" sampling process (Babbie, 1995).

Data-gathering and Data analysis

The specific phenomena, that is, the central research question was: "How do gifted Hispanic and Pueblo Indian adults, born and raised in northern New Mexico, perceive their own giftedness, their school experiences and identity?". In order to better understand these issues, an in-depth, semi-structured interview format was used. The questions addressed participants' experiences, feelings, and beliefs about the research theme. Participants were allowed and encouraged to provide "rich descriptions" of their own experiences permitting also other issues to emerge. The interview was reciprocal in the sense that both researcher and participants engaged in a dialogue. Kvale (1996) remarks that the qualitative interview "is literally and inter-view" where the "researcher attempts to "understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold meaning of people's experiences" (pp. 1-2).

The duration of each interview was about 1 hour and 30 minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Privacy was ensured. The participants were allowed to review the interview transcripts. All interviews were conducted by the researcher. Reliability and trustworthiness of the study was insured by using theory and data triangulation.

Coffey & Atkinson (1996, p.9) regard qualitative analysis as “the systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships”, as a way to transform the data through interpretation. The steps taken to analyze the data were: a) Identifying units of meaning; b) clustering of units of meaning to form themes; and c) extracting general and unique themes from each interview and from all interviews. The analytic technique consisted of constant comparisons to build a conceptual understanding of the categories within the phenomenon of interest. As categories, conditions and linkages were explicated, unifying themes were identified (Creswell, 1998).

Findings

Several main themes, related to subjects’ identities and giftedness, emerged in the interviews. The themes tended to overlap, thus, the chosen categories are only one of several possible ways to understand the issues at hand.

Contradictory Social Identities

The first important issue that emerged from the interviews was the possibility that Hispanic and Pueblo students may reject the gifted label because it may be perceived as contradictory to a social identity previously acquired.

Jose, by the time he was identified as gifted in high school, already had the social label of being a troublemaker, thus, it was difficult for him to reconcile this already established social identity with the new gifted label:

“As I entered middle-school, the label that I acquired was that of a troublemaker. So, later, having the label of gifted was a really weird thing to me. For me, academics and being gifted were more like an afterthought. It wasn’t important. My main goal was to make sure I stood out in the group.”

Jose’s experience seems to indicate the importance of early screening and identification (Ford & Harris, 1997). Matthews (2009) points out that a child’s interests and supports for learning can be significantly influenced by cultural experiences and stereotype-based expectations. At earlier stages of their development, students may have the opportunity to more easily incorporate their giftedness into their social identities.

A more extreme case of rejection of the gifted label was that of Ana who perceived being gifted as a complete contradiction of her main cultural values and identity:

“I didn’t want the gifted label. I didn’t want to stand out from my friends. People may think you are better than them, or you might start thinking you are better than people because you are smarter or more intelligent. I didn’t want to make them feel that way for one thing and I didn’t want them to think different of me in any way.”

Ana’s aversion to rank people in any way seems to be a common aspect of the northern

New Mexico culture, specially the Pueblo. Peterson (1999) found that Latino subjects emphasized humility and American Indians rejected the concept of hierarchy. Tamara Fisher (2008), president of the Montana Association of Gifted and Talented Education, had the same experience in her practice with Native Americans:

“It’s imperative to let gifted children know that being gifted and being part of a gifted program isn’t about being “better”. It’s simply a matter of a learning difference. For my Indian students, whose humility and respectfulness pervade their thoughts and actions, it is a point of view that offers them a sigh of relief. They love being challenged, but they shy away from being “better”. When they understand that being in GT is about reaching their learning needs and not about bestowing golden status in certain students, they embrace the services offered and thrive” (Fisher, 2008, January 7).

Gifted adolescents may manage their social identity by camouflaging their exceptional abilities so they appear normal. They can do that by not identifying with their gifted peers and adopting the behavior of a more desirable peer group (Coleman & Cross, 2000), as seen in the cases of Jose and Ana.

Contradictory Values

Hispanics and Pueblo students seem to also perceive a contradiction between the schools’ values and their own cultural values. This can not only prevent them from wanting to be identified as gifted but can also prevent them from taking educational opportunities when those are presented to them. This was the case with Emily:

“[When I finished high school] I applied also to Harvard and got in. I had the money to go to Harvard, but I only applied. I didn’t really want to go because I didn’t want to deal with, I guess, the wealth, [the whole culture] of Harvard. I knew it would be totally the opposite of what I am.” And also:

“I wanted to go to Dartmouth in New Hampshire, and they had flown me out there on my senior year to visit the campus and I got to know everyone there. They had a strong Native American community there, so I wanted to go, but my family kept me here. I knew how much of an impact it was going to be if I had gone that far. So, I chose to go to a university that was within a driving distance from my family.”

This perceived contradiction between school and community values is also demonstrated by the students’ valuing of oral, traditional knowledge as much as, or even more than academic knowledge. Ana stated:

“My family valued all kinds of knowledge. This man, one day, was talking about his grandpa that has all this knowledge about the earth and the seasons, and planting and that just has equal value as someone with a Ph.D. Our society here, values all kinds of knowledge.”

Jose shared a similar point of view:

“That’s one thing that [my wife] and I definitely do [with our children]. We have them value traditional knowledge over what you would call modern knowl-

edge. In agricultural societies there is not a lot of paper work but there is a lot of oral tradition. So, we put more value on that than in what you can learn from a book even though books are very valuable. And I always try and make sure that my daughters know the difference between the two and that they value ancestral knowledge.”

Program and Curriculum Issues

Hispanic and Pueblo students in northern New Mexico seem not to value an education which they perceive as removed from their interests, and issues. Jose said:

“I didn’t fit in the structure [of the school]. A lot that was missing was how abstract concepts related to my reality. They could teach me about George Washington, but if you don’t even understand the whole economic realities of why certain communities are impoverished, even though we have a large land base, I mean, that’s something concrete that I could touch and see every day, but those connections were never built to my reality. So, the whole time I’m sitting there thinking ‘There is no value in this history book, there is no value in this math because it does not directly relate to me.’”

Even in a predominantly diverse region like northern New Mexico, where Hispanics and Pueblo Indians are not in the minority, these students perceived the schools as not valuing their cultural identity resulting in low expectations and underachievement. This is what Ana said:

“There should be an exploration of identity [in school], and identity isn’t a focus. I mean, you are taught to have this Eurocentric identity. You have that put on you, and that’s immediately rejected. And we can’t name it at the time, when you are young. You don’t even know how to describe it like that, put it into words. You just know it exists and you have a feeling of being boxed in, hindered. It’s almost like the status quo is low, so you can get by with underachieving.”

Both Jose and Ana, after describing the gap they felt existed between their lives and the school, proceed to say that they, along with several other gifted students, dropped out of school. They have returned to school for college, but many of their friends, according to them, did not have the same opportunity.

Perceptions of Giftedness

According to Dweck (1999, 2006), people hold one of two implicit theories of intelligence. Entity theorists believe that intelligence is fixed and each person has his or her allotted share. In contrast, incremental theorists believe that intelligence is modifiable by increased effort. Hispanic and Pueblo adults of northern New Mexico explained their giftedness in terms of nurturing and effort and never as an inner or superior ability:

“Looking back [I don’t think] I was exceptional. I was a first child and my mom spent a lot of time with me reading. Also, culturally, being a male, I was given more resources. I have seen lots of things to back up my opinion that males receive more [attention], so, that’s why I say I don’t really feel like I was exceptional, I just feel like I was nurtured a little more.”

The incremental theory is also illustrated by Emily's statement:

"The main reason I applied to Harvard is because a lot of the kids at my high school felt that there was no way a Native American, specially from around here, could get into Harvard. So, I did it to prove the rest of the students that somebody from our school could go over there. So, I told all my friends that I got accepted, and I told them that I did it to prove to everybody else, and my family, that somebody could get there and that anybody can go, you just got to work hard."

In 1993, Subotnik et.al published a longitudinal study of high IQ White children as adults. Among other things, she asked them to define giftedness. Most of her subjects defined it in terms of an intrinsic characteristic such as having more talent or ability than others. All of the adults interviewed for this study, however, attributed performance or achievement to external factors (nurture and effort) rather than internal ones.

School Factors

When schools blame families and students' cultures for their underachievement, they are usually forgetting about the influence that educational institutions and teachers' expectations have on students' achievement (Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995). One of Jose's experiences at school may help to illustrate this point:

"Our interests weren't pursued [in the gifted [program]] because of lack of funding or lack of having a teacher that really cared. There were maybe one or two teachers that really understood. So, I was just sleeping in class, or talking. [And there was a point] where I had a teacher in high school that made me and another student stand up and she basically said that gifted students rarely make it through life successfully, that they usually end up drug addicts or whatever. Then she proceeded to ask who they thought was going to make it in life, me or this other student who wasn't gifted."

In the interview, Jose proceeded to explain how he, at least for a while, lived up to this teacher's negative expectations. It took him many years to change his self-perception and start achieving to his potential.

Studies show that the impact of teacher beliefs on Black students is greater than the impact on White students (Ferguson, 1998; McKown & Weinstein, 2002). When students from stigmatized groups are identified as gifted they might be likely to have a lower sense of efficacy and greater doubts about their ability to succeed (Gabelko & Sosniak, 2002), being especially vulnerable to teachers' negative beliefs and criticisms.

In order to be successful, school programs need to relate to students. Emily exemplified that when she explained that she did not go to Harvard because its culture was not a part of who "she was". Jose also related a similar fear of losing his identity when he rejected going to a technical school in Albuquerque because "in the city I'm just another person". Their sense of belonging in the land and of being part of a community is an essential component of the identity of Hispanic and Pueblo students in northern New Mexico and schools need to validate it.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This research project was intended to identify important issues that need to be further explored. The findings indicate that early identification and placement of gifted Hispanic and Pueblo children might be important since competing identities may get them to refuse the gifted label as part of their social identity.

There seems to be a perceived contradiction between the values pursued by the schools and the students' cultural values. For instance, there is a desire for the schools to value not only "book" knowledge, but also oral, traditional knowledge. Because this informal knowledge is not acknowledged and the schools do not make an effort to connect to students' social and economic realities, students have difficulty seeing the relevance of staying in school and pursuing and education.

Another important finding that needs more exploration is the apparent difficulty that students have to leave their communities to pursue educational opportunities. It points out to the need to develop and foster educational opportunities close to their place of origin.

A significant finding was that the local Hispanic and Pueblo gifted students tend to be incremental theorists (Dweck, 1999, 2006). They explain their giftedness in terms of nurture and effort rather than ability. This information seems to be important for teachers and counselors as they advise students in a manner that is respectful of their cultural values.

Lastly, schools' and teachers' low expectations for Pueblo and Hispanic students seem to be a concern. In the Pueblo community, there may be a general feeling of hopelessness and impotence regarding students' abilities or opportunities to reach high academic goals. In addition there seems to be even worse perceptions and expectations among teachers and counselors towards minority gifted students. However, there are also indications that the presence of positive role models and mentors may greatly increase these students' chances for success.

All the above issues need to be further addressed through more in depth, qualitative studies. There is a great need to better understand the deep social economical and cultural issues of this region and translate those into effective educational practices.

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