

Promising Practices to Achieve Equity in Gifted Education: Teaching Thinking Skills to Primary Students

by Ann Duchscher

Inequity in gifted programs has been a decades-long struggle for school systems across the country. Specifically, Black, Latinx, and Native American students are disproportionately underrepresented compared to their representation in the overall student population. Race is not the only factor. Students served through special education and English language learner programs and students who are from low-income households are also underrepresented. As with most issues in education, underrepresentation is both complex and nuanced, and the solution much the same. If there was a single test that could identify students equitably, we would all have used it by now.

As the coordinator of the gifted program for a large school district in North Dakota, our program, Gifted Services, received [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) (ESSER) funding to work on closing the excellence and opportunity gap for students from traditionally underserved populations in gifted education. Our school district's data shows that underrepresentation — or disproportionality — of certain populations exists within our gifted program. Thus this becomes *our inequity* problem because we know that giftedness occurs in all racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, as well as all economic strata. And while there does not seem to be sweeping consensus among scholars yet about how to solve it, experts are laying out practices that hold promise.

One of these practices now part of Gifted Services is the teaching of critical thinking skills to primary students or **PETS**, Primary Education Thinking Skills instruction. PETS is a systematic approach to teaching young students (K-2) the language and processes of critical thinking. Critical thinking skills included in PETS are convergent analysis, divergent synthesis, visual-spatial thinking, and evaluation. The purpose in providing primary students experiences with these thinking skills is diagnostic in nature. First, PETS provides front loading of the vocabulary and processes of critical thinking. Second, the lessons allow both the classroom teacher and Gifted Services teacher to observe and collaborate on all students' application of the thinking skills. These lessons allow teachers to see their students apply high level thinking skills, especially in students that had not shown such skills before. This is important because the goal is to spot talent and determine which students seem to be applying the skill at high levels even if they are not yet exhibiting academic talent. Currently, PETS lessons are occurring throughout FPS Title I elementary schools and additionally at several non-Title schools.

Teaching thinking skills to all students at a grade level is one new facet to identification, a way to universally consider all students in order to mitigate opportunity gaps and a way to spot latent, or hidden, talent. In other words, we are using teacher-applied inquiry to attack the problem. After all, teachers live in the classroom all day long and often can be hands on, minds on action researchers. Our problem to solve as teacher-researchers is that we find our gifted program has disproportionate outcomes. Minority students by race/ethnicity, cultural linguistic diversity, special education status, and even socio-economic status are underrepresented in gifted programming. The implementation of PETS is a promising practice to see if we can improve outcomes for students.

Is PETS improving our student outcomes? It is a little early to tell but so far, the results appear promising, too. The classroom teachers and Gifted Services teachers report observing students applying critical thinking skills that they might not have otherwise seen. The Gifted Services teachers analyze the students' application of the skills along with other available data. They continue to work in small groups with students where the thinking skills shift into advanced academic content.

Ultimately, this is the goal: to optimize the identification process by supporting and accelerating students with gifted potential into manifesting their abilities within the regular gifted services program model. While the gifted literature is abundant with practices on what we should and shouldn't be doing, as of yet there is not a perfect solution. We recognize, though, it is time to respond with a change in practices -- time to put the literature into action, carefully reflect on the results, and make changes again where needed.